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GUNS CLAIM THE LAND

by LLOYD ERIC REEVE

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By
Lloyd Eric Reeve

GUNS CLAIM THE LAND

The girl, alone on the ranch, looked like easy prey for the land-hungry villain. . . .

IT WAS hazy twilight when Joel Benton left his trail-gaunted roan at the livery stable. His high body went up the board walk, boot-heels a harsh and measured clacking, dusty sombrero set far back on the sandy head. He turned into the deserted lobby of the Boston House. Over the register he hesitated only an instant, pen poised, lean face honed and hard, and then he slashed down his name in a bold and sudden way. He meant it as a deliberate challenge.

Upstairs, he found an empty room. He lit the kerosene lamp. By the time he had shaved and scrubbed away two weeks of trail dust, solid darkness had crushed down hotly against the single fly-specked window. He went back

downstairs. In the dining room, curbing a savage impatience, he forced himself to eat, his first food since morning, and then returned to the lobby.

Old Sam Langley was behind the desk now. The swinging oil lamp, haloed with a little swarm of insects, spilled yellow light across his bald pate. "Knew you'd come," he said. His stubby forefinger jabbed Joel's name on the register. "But why you got to flag it to the sky that way?"

"Then Trantler's seen it?" Joel asked.

"Same as," Langley said. "One of his hands. Like as not he's already on his way in. He'll want a look at you."

Joel nodded. "Figured my name on the register would smoke him out. Well, I want a look, too."

"Better make the first one good," Langley said. "You might not get so many. Anyway stay out of lighted windows."

"That how he got Long-Horn?"

"Long-Horn was found out on the range," Langley said. "His head was full of daylight. You heard from the lawyer, eh?"

Joel nodded. "I can't figure it, Sam. Long-Horn makes this new will, just before he was killed. Leaves me everything he had—and me not even his own flesh and blood and him always so loco over Susan, his own daughter."

"He saw you same as a son," Langley said.

"Until I walked out on him," Joel said. "Took me in as a stray, raised me up right along with Sue, and then, come the first time he really needs me, and I'm long gone."

"Your back was always stiff with pride." Langley shrugged. "You figured Susan wouldn't cotton up to any stray mixing in with the blooded herd. But you didn't fool Long-Horn none by running off that way—or maybe even Susan. Long-Horn knew you'd always come a-running back if ever you was needed."

"Which is why he willed me the brand?"

"Only way to read it," Langley said. "Leaving Susan the outfit would have been the same as handing her a lighted stick of dynamite. Trantler moved in after you

left. Took over fast, this whole valley, except Long-Horn's range. Tried to buy out Long-Horn, too, for a song, but Long-Horn never did go for that kind of singing. So Trantler must have figured that with Long-Horn under the grass he'd have no trouble squeezing out a girl like Susan for next to nothing. What he didn't count on was Long-Horn dealing himself a hole-card with that will, just in case. Leastwise, Trantler's got himself a man to handle now, and no reason at all to work out on Susan."

"Where's Susan staying?" Joel asked.

"Still at the ranch," Langley said. "Alone. Let all the hands go for fear some of them would meet up with some more accidents—like Long-Horn. She claims she's only keeping your property going, Joel, just until you can take over. You're going to run into a mite of trouble there. Maybe she figures why Long-Horn left you the spread, but her pride won't let her admit it. Says as how she's walking out the day you ride in."

"I could just deed the ranch back to her," Joel said.

"And make her fair game again for Trantler?" Langley asked.

"Well," Joel said, "I can settle with Trantler first."

"He'll have his own ideas about that," Langley observed. "He's—" He broke off, listening as a murmur of hoofs came beating through the night. A pair of riders ghosted past the open hotel door. Langley said, a little flatly, "Speaking of the devil." He said, "He'll hole up at the Ox Bow, figuring as how you're pretty sure to drift in for a drink sooner or later."

"Why not right now," Joel said. "No sense in keeping the man waiting." He turned easily, walking unhurriedly toward the door. Over his shoulder he said, "See you later, Sam."

Sam said, "I hope so."

IT WAS a black night, and hot, powdered with a dry scent of sage and pine, and the lingering hint of dust stirred by the two riders who had just passed. He watched them swing from their saddles at the Ox Bow, across the

street and a hundred yards away. As they went through the bat-wing doors into the saloon, yellow light splashed out briefly against the molten darkness.

Joel stepped into the dust of the street, angling toward the Ox Bow. He slipped his six-shooter from its holster, spun the cylinder once, and then eased it lightly back. Crossing the wooden walk, his hands hanging free at his sides, he struck open the swinging doors with a turning shoulder. He stood for an instant just inside, wrapping up that whole smoky room with one sweeping glance.

At the bar, and around poker tables, were a score or so of cowhands, ranchers, bearded freighters and townsmen. He had no way of telling which was the recently arrived pair. He sauntered up to the bar, seeking some clue, and got it almost instantly from Pat Riley, the grey-haired barkeep. Pat had known Joel since he was a kid, yet his knobby face held no recognition now, except to flick with a single glance of veiled warning a pair standing up to the bar some ten feet away. Pat was trying to tell him that here was Trantler, to play it safe, but that was the one way Joel had no intention of playing it. Deliberately he lifted his voice:

"Why, Pat Riley," he said, "you old horse thief. Don't you even remember me? I'm Joel Benton."

The name slapped the saloon with a sudden silence. Riley said, with a kind of dry anger, "Why, so you are. My eyes must be getting old. What'll it be?" His lips added silently, "Joel, you damn fool."

"Whiskey," Joel said.

All along the bar men had melted away. They clotted up in little groups, close to the door, watching narrowly, and a little morbidly, in the saffron smoky lamplight. Only the pair flicked by Riley's glance were still at the bar, and now one of these moved two sliding steps aside. Lean and hammer-jawed, he was suddenly motionless, thumbs hooked lightly in cartridge belt, his colorless eyes fastening into Joel like a pair of fish-hooks. The other, massive, thick of jowl, and florid, had already wheeled half around, flinging against Joel a heavy-lidded stare.

Joel ignored it. He lifted his whiskey-glass, and nodded briefly to Pat Riley.

"To Long-Horn Bailey," he said. "And to the slug I'm saving for his killer."

The massive man spoke then. "Benton," he said, "I'm Brad Trantler."

Joel half turned to face him. "Heard of you," he said. "The toast still stands."

"Meaning?"

"Whatever you figure it means," Joel said.

"Dammit, you two," Pat Riley fumed helplessly, "take it outside, can't you? It'll be a slaughter in here."

JOEL said, "I doubt it. Not when you remember how Long-Horn was killed. That kind of white-livered scum never touches his gun when he's facing anybody. Am I right, Trantler?"

"Go on," Trantler said, "have your little show. I'm not playing. All I want is Long-Horn's range. Figured to buy it, but he turned down my offer, and then right after he had a—accident. Seeing as how you're the new owner, Benton, I'm ready to offer you a fair price."

"Not interested," Joel said.

"Well," Trantler said, "neither was Long-Horn. So, like I said, he had that accident."

"Trantler," Joel said, "you've just confessed a killing."

"Nuh-uh," Trantler denied. He grinned brashly. "I just pointed out a coincidence. But there could be another."

"Killing me won't get you the Bar K range," Joel said.

Trantler nodded. "Which is why I've been taking your loose lip—so far. You aren't the only one who could have a accident."

Something like a cold finger touched Joel's spine. Trantler said, quick as a striking snake, "I mean Long-Horn's girl is still out there. Bad place for a woman. Accident could happen to her, too."

It was the one thing Joel hadn't foreseen, that even without the ranch Susan Bailey could still be used by Trantler to get it.

"About my offer for the Bar K," Trantler reminded. "Maybe now you've changed your mind. Maybe you'd like to listen to it, after all."

Had he left it there he might have won. But he couldn't. Not satisfied with knocking down a man, he had to try to trample him. He added, with a faintly ugly grin, "Of course, it's not likely she'd meet up with the same kind of accident as Long-Horn. Too pretty a filly for that. But there's more than one kind of accident."

That did it. The wash of violence that flashed through Joel was sudden and blinding. His right hand, hovering at his side, settled a little. "Trantler," he said, "go for your gun."

Trantler grinned. "Told you I wasn't playing it your way." His brash laugh blared suddenly. "You're covered, Benton! Move that hand even an inch and you're dead."

Too late Joel heard the faint snick of metal against leather. His glance flicked sideways, to the lank hammer-jawed man who had stepped aside from Trantler moments before, saw now that his gun had already leaped into his hand. Joel looked straight into its black mocking muzzle.

"Keep him under it, Hawley," Trantler ordered. He went up to Joel in three long strides. "One move," he warned again, "and Hawley splatters you. And then where's that girl, if she's what's got you lathering, and I reckon she is." His right hand came up in a long swing and landed with a flat-palmed smack against Joel's face. It jolted his head to one side, yet he took it silently, held motionless, not by Hawley's leveled gun, but by the suddenly shattering thought of Susan Bailey left alone in a world that still contained a Brad Trantler. Trantler's hand back-lashed in another vicious blow. "Part payment only," he said. "For some of the things you've said. But don't worry, you'll get the rest. Just give me time."

HE WHEELED and went out of the saloon. Hawley, his pale stare still fixing Joel, gun still leveled, began a slow backward walking toward the bat-wing doors. His shoulders hit them and he vanished through them.

Joel swung around to Pat Riley. "Let that be a lesson to you, son," he said. "Don't ever try to draw to an inside straight." Deliberately he finished his drink. He put the glass down. Then he left, shouldering his bitter way through the still silent and gaping crowd. Outside, the only sign of Trantler and Hawley was a fading drum of hoof-beats. Suddenly he knew there was no time left at all. He ran through the night to the livery stable, saddled his roan, and only minutes later was riding the old remembered trail to the Bar K—and Susan Bailey.

Half a dying moon hung like a sultry ember over a black and distant splotch of mountains. The hot silence was saturated with the dry tang of sage and a resinous breath of pine. Once, far off, he thought he detected a faint murmur of hoofs, running briefly through the vast stillness, and now and again the haunting cry of a coyote echoed its timeless lament across boundless leagues of wilderness.

A growing sense of urgency possessed him. It was all he could do, despite the treacherous footing of a night trail, not to lift the roan into a head-long run. The thirty-some minutes it took him to reach the Bar K seemed endless hours.

THE RAMBLING old ranchhouse was dark and silent. He left his lathered roan at the hitch-rack. He went around to the kitchen door. He eased inside, and instantly he was swept again with a poignant sense of the past. Long-Horn, the only father he had ever known, and Susan —a long-legged colt with flying golden mane, a tom-boy if ever there was one, matching him and sometimes surpassing him on a horse, with a rope, even with a gun. Long-Horn grinning a little and saying as how he allowed it was high time she was broke to being a lady, and then bundling her off to school in the East.

The night before she was to leave, Joel had awkwardly kissed her. Instantly she had slapped his face, and then, the next instant, had flung her arms around his neck, sobbing she would wait for him for ever and ever.

HE WOULD never forget the three long years she had been gone, her excited letters of picnics and parties and fashionable balls. And men. And the conviction finally that her journey had been not just to the East, but into a new world from which she could never wholly return, nor to which he could ever possibly belong, that never now could he hold her to that childhood promise, but that neither, feeling as he did, could he go on living in the same house with her. So the night before she was due home he had saddled a horse and ridden into the deep darkness, and he had not stopped until he had put half a thousand miles behind him.

Later he had written Long-Horn, saying only that the time had come when he had to make his own way. Maybe Long-Horn had understood. At least he had answered, saying as how he was never one to believe in the short halter, but that Joel's home was here and waiting whenever he got ready to come back. And so now he was back—but only after the old cowman had extended a faith in him beyond even the clammy reach of a treacherous death. . . .

Joel came back to the present with a start, unaware whether he had been standing here lost in the past for seconds or long minutes. Some wary sense restrained him from sending a shout for Susan through the silent house. His hands found the lamp on the kitchen table. He struck a match and it bloomed into turgid yellow light. Carrying the lamp he went to the remembered door of Susan's room. It was open. In the wash of murky light he saw her sleeping, breathing gently, fair hair tousled across the pillow, and through him then went an almost savage gust of relief that nothing yet had happened to her.

"Susan," he said. "Sue. It's me, Joel. Sue, wake up."

She stirred, murmuring a bewildered protest, and he said again, "Sue, wake up."

Her eyes opened sleepily, and she gazed up at him in a still dreaming way. A half smile played around her lips, and she murmured in a kind of pleased surprise, "Joel—why—Joel. . . ." Suddenly the blue eyes flared, shocked and hurt and angry. She sat up straight, clutching the

covers against her. "You," she said. "*You.*" Her voice curled with stinging contempt. "I've been expecting you," she said. "To claim your property. But I thought even you had more decency than to come prowling into my bedroom in the middle of the night. But I was wrong. Just as I was wrong about you once before, five years ago."

"Sue," he said, "this is your home, and you're going to stay here just as long as you want—but only after I've made it safe for you."

"Somehow," she said, "you worked dad into giving you everything he had. I don't know how, but you did. You've inherited the ranch, yes. And everything that goes with it—except me. I don't go with the ranch. Now get out. Come back tomorrow, and I'll be gone. But now just get out."

Suddenly his temper flared. "You always were as stubborn as a mule," he said. "I've got to talk to you, and right now, tonight. I'm going back to the kitchen. You throw on some duds and join me there and make it fast."

"Get out," she said. Her eyes blazed and a wild color flamed in her smooth cheeks. To Joel, she looked more beautiful than ever.

"Then," he said, a little flatly, "I'll just have to talk to you here."

HE TOOK one step inside the room, and instantly her slim body whirled in the bed, swiftly as fluid quicksilver. Her small hand flashed out from under her pillow, and as she twisted back toward him he suddenly found himself looking down the barrel of the heavy six-shooter that once had been her father's. The huge gun looked ridiculous in her small hand—ridiculous, except that it was steady as death itself. For a fleeting instant he was swept with the memory of a smaller gun barking from her hand all of ten years before, and himself looking down and seeing with a faintly sick sensation the headless length of a rattler lashing around his own bare feet. That time, though, she had probably saved his life. This time her intention was different. She said, "Don't think I

won't. One more step and you'll find out. Now will you please go?"

For a bitter instant he watched her. She might very well have it in her to pull the trigger. He couldn't be sure. All he knew was that he couldn't walk out on her again, as he had walked out of this house once before, two long years ago.

"All right, Sue," he said. "If you aim to kill me go ahead. But otherwise put away that gun." He walked deliberately forward, still holding the lamp shoulder-high.

Her blue eyes blazed at him, defiant and accusing beneath the tousled yellow hair. For just an instant he was certain she was going to pull the trigger, but then, suddenly, her whole face seemed to crumple and the gun dropped from her limp fingers. She covered her face with her hands.

"You see, Sue," he said, "you don't really believe any of the things you've been saying. This proves it."

"It proves nothing," she half-sobbed through her hands. "Except that I'm a weak-kneed fool."

He touched gently the bent head. "I'll be in the kitchen," he said. "Get yourself dressed. But make it fast. Sue, I tell you there's no longer time for any foolishness at all."

FOR A BITTER instant just past, he knew, only a memory had stood between himself and death—the memory that put the lamp on the table, hooked out a chair with his boot, and straddled it, arms folded across the back.

For a bitter instant just past, he knew, only a memory had stood between himself and death—the memory that had spoken in her voice and looked out of her slumberous eyes in that first instant of dreamy waking, as of long ago childhood, before her conviction of his faithlessness and selfish indifference had reared its wall between them. But now the wall was there, and no one could tear it down, anymore than you could move time backward. . . .

He heard her light step, and his head lifted, and through him went suddenly a wave of amazement. She was wearing a long dress, open at the throat, but in her haste

she had left the tawny hair falling loose and disheveled around her slender shoulders. He had remembered her only as he had last seen her, a coltish tom-boy and now he saw a warmly mature young woman before him.

"Why, Sue," he said, "you've grown up. You're pretty—you're beautiful."

Her cheeks flamed angrily again. "Is that all you—you dragged me out of bed for, just to talk about how I look?"

"But still the same little hellion," he added, grinning faintly. "No, that's not what I came for, but seeing you like this, the way you've changed, sort of knocked the wind out of me. It's been years since I saw you last, since Long-Horn packed you off to school."

"And whose fault is that?" Susan asked. "It wasn't *me* that jilted *you*."

"Now, Sue," he said. "You were just a kid, so was I. I wasn't going to hold you to any promise you no longer could want to keep."

"Wasn't I the one to decide that?" Susan asked. "Let me tell you something, Joel. The promise I made the night before I left meant something to me. It didn't to you. I had faith in you, and you had none at all in me. The night I got home, and found you had run out, the Joel I had remembered for three long years died. Maybe I had loved the boy, but from that minute on I hated the man he had become. The quitter."

For a long instant Joel was silent. Suddenly he could think of no defense at all. "All right," he said. "But Long-Horn still put a trust in me, right or wrong. Else he'd never have willed me this place, just to protect you from Trantler, and to gamble I'd somehow get the ranch back to you after his claws were pulled."

Her slim shoulders lifted in a brief shrug. "Oh, I suppose that's how dad meant it," she admitted. "But to me all your coming back now means is that a saddle tramp has suddenly found himself inheriting a big property. Why wouldn't he come back to claim it? If you could help me a little at the same time, why that's fine and a sop to

your conscience. But if the cards were down, if it were me or the ranch, then what would you do?"

"I won't even answer that," Joel said. "What's the use when your mind's already made up. All I want now is to get you out of here and fast. And not just off the ranch. I want you clean out of the country until this thing's settled one way or another. I'm taking you to Broken Wagon, and putting you on the train for Kansas City."

"Oh, no, you're not," Susan said. "I'll leave, of course, and right now. But not with you."

Joel swung from the chair. "Sue," he said, "are you coming with me, or do I have to throw and hog-tie you?"

"That's no way to talk to a lady," Brad Trantler said.

. . . .

JOEL spun around, Susan gasped, and then they both went motionless, under the bludgeoning stare of Trantler's and Hawley's guns.

"Figured you'd high-tail to her," Trantler told Joel. "Soon as I got you lathering. Keep 'em covered, Hawley." He stepped forward, pulled a folded document from his hip pocket, spread it out on the table. "Here you are, sonny. All you got to do is sign your name to this. It deeds me the ranch, for a reasonable price." He reached down pen and ink from a shelf behind the table, offered the pen to Joel. "Just sign your name, sonny."

"Joel, don't," Susan warned swiftly. "He'll just kill you afterward. It'll be another accident, like Dad's."

Trantler's insolent stare raked across her. "I'll remember that," he told her. He looked back at Joel. "Come on, sonny, I haven't got all night. You can write, can't you!"

"No," Joel said. "Not that kind of writing."

"What you know?" Trantler said. "He can't write. Bet he can learn, though. Bet he can learn faster than anybody ever learnt before." He looked back at Susan. "Hawley," he said, "you take this filly off somewhere in the house. See if you can make her holler a little. Bet if she hollers just once, sonny-boy here will recollect how to write."

Hawley looked at her. His eye-lids drooped slightly and

his lips stretched thinly. He took one step toward her, and instantly Joel spoke. "All right, Trantler," he said. "Leave her alone. I'll sign."

He snatched the pen and slashed his name across the deed. Susan caught her breath. Staring at Joel, her eyes seemed amazed, and then, curiously, even a little ashamed. She half-whispered, "But—I thought—I. . . ." Her gaze, stricken now, leaped back to Hawley, dilating with a faint horror, and then, all in an instant, she had swirled out of the saffron lamplight and there was only the clatter of her flying feet fading away through the darkened house.

Trantler cursed, and Hawley plunged from the room, pounding after her. Joel felt his whole body tensing for a reckless spring. But Trantler's gun reared slightly, ugly with leashed threat. "Steady, sonny-boy," he cautioned. "Don't be in such an all-fired hurry to die."

"Damn you, Trantler," Joel said. "I signed your paper. You've got what you want. Now let her alone. If you don't, I'll—"

"You'll nothing," Trantler said. "Figure I'm such a fool as to leave either of you above ground now?" The gun muzzle dipped a little to leer at Joel's stomach. "In just a minute I'll let you have it. Where it'll hurt most. But I promised to pay you off for all that rooster-crowing in the saloon. Hawley will catch her in a minute. I still want you to hear her hollering a little before you get too busy hollering just for yourself."

JOEL clamped down the surging violence within him, knowing that to delay his own death even for a few seconds would give Susan just that much more time to make good her desperate flight. His back was to the table, the lamp behind him, the jeering stare of Trantler's gun less than ten feet away. Somewhere in the house a door slammed suddenly, to Susan's bedroom he thought. He heard it wrenched violently open, which would be Hawley, surging in after her. He waited, every nerve cringing for her expected scream.

Oddly it didn't come. Nothing came, except this settling

silence, thick, enormous, malignant. What was happening in that hushed and evil darkness? It seemed to stretch, expand, and then suddenly was broken again, ripped through with another clattering rush of footsteps. Hawley burst back into the kitchen, looking angry and confused.

"She's gone," he blared. "Out the window." He lunged toward the half-open door.

"Hold it." Trantler stopped him short. "Now we've got to finish this one first. Might take hours to find her in the dark." He looked at Joel. "All right, sonny-boy, here it comes."

Trantler's trigger finger contracted, and Joel, clawing for his own gun then, with no time left at all, let his whole body explode in a violent sideway leap. At the same instant, a gun's flat crash shook the room. He fell, sprawling, the floor smashing against him, and was swept suddenly with a blinding darkness. He could see nothing at all. He thought it was the blackness of death, that he was hit mortally, and yet oddly felt no pain at all. Suddenly then he realized that a tinkling sound, which had trickled off the gun crash, as of breaking glass, must have been the lamp, that it had been the lamp and not himself that had been bullet-shattered even as he made his desperate leap aside.

He was flat on his stomach in the suffocating darkness, gun still clutched in his hand, every nerve listening for even a wisp of sound that might locate Trantler or Hawley. Each second became an eternity, each black and bloated with a monstrous threat. He could sense the half open door now. From his prone position, it was a paler darkness, patched with stars.

Something quivered in the solid blackness, so faintly he felt rather than actually heard it. But then it came again, a slow creeping rustle. He tipped up his gun and fired. At the same instant he rolled swiftly aside. Flame crashed back at his gun flash, quick as an echo. He heard the bullet slice through the chunk of darkness which had held his body only an instant before.

Again the silence stretched and swelled. It seemed some-

thing must break, and, suddenly, something did—Hawley's nerve, in a scrabbling rush of feet, in his lank body silhouetted in a plunging dive through the patch of stars that defined the door. Instantly Joel's gun reached for him in a chattering burst. The leaping shape folded in midair. It dropped in a crumbling collapse.

JOEL had wrenched to his feet. As he rushed backward Trantler's gun yapped after him, chasing him in a trailing hail of bullets. His back collided against the wall. He ran sideways, knocking over an unseen chair, swiveling his weapon to throw its jolting thunder at the pale hysterical flashing of Trantler's gun.

And suddenly that flashing was quenched, snuffed out as though slapped by a gigantic hand. He held his fire. For an instant he heard nothing, but then, from the blackness across the room, came now a rasping sigh, as of the sudden collapse of deadly weary lungs. He squeezed through the darkness, acrid now with gun smoke, his left hand probing until it found the sprawled body. His fingers recoiled briefly from something wet and sticky, then feeling forward again recognized the chest. No heart moved within.

He felt his way outside, stepping over the limp heap of Hawley's body. He washed out his lungs with great gulps of clean air. He was about to call out for Susan when she appeared suddenly from the darker shadows beside the house. Her voice went a little hysterical.

"I didn't run out on you! Joel, I didn't! I remembered the gun I'd dropped in the bed—ran for it—went out the window—I meant to cover them, but then I couldn't see anyone but you through the doorway—he was going to kill you—I shot out the lamp—there was nothing else I could do—I—I. . . ." She covered her face with her hands. Suddenly she was sobbing wildly.

He touched her head gently with his right hand, aware that the other was still wet with a dark horror. "Hush," he said. "Hush now. You can't go back in there tonight. I'm taking you to town."

Early that next evening Joel found Susan in a chair on the long porch of the Boston House. He said, a little stiffly, "I couldn't get back sooner. I've been to Cattle City. Saw a lawyer there, and the U. S. Marshal. The marshal went back to the ranch with me. We burned that deed I signed and took care of—of everything else out there. You can go back home now. You have nothing more to fear."

She stood up, slim and pale against the twilight shadows. "You own it now," she said. "I have no right going back there again."

He shook his head briefly, held out a folded paper. "This deeds it back to you. It's why I saw the lawyer this morning.

She took the deed from his hand. "I don't need this, Joel, to tell me how wrong I was—when I said all you wanted was the ranch. I learned that last night. I mean—oh, what else can I say—*now*, when I'm so terribly ashamed of the way I behaved. . . ."

"You said it all last night," Joel told her. "When you shot out that lamp—just as Trantler started to slaughter me. Sue, it's over; you're safe. I'll soon be long gone, you've got the ranch back, and. . . ."

"Not now, I haven't the ranch." Swiftly, almost angrily she tore the deed to bits. "It's always been my home," she said. "I want it, yes, with all my heart." She glanced down at the scattered scraps of the deed. "But not *that* way."

"But how else can you have it," he said, "except to own it, to—"

"Oh, there's another way," she said, "a better way—such a better way." Suddenly her cheeks flamed. She was looking up at him through angry tears. "Must you make me say it all—can't you even. . . ."

Joel could hardly believe his ears.

He reached for her suddenly, and she came up against him, closely and warmly and swiftly yielding. "How else can I have it?" she murmured. "Like this, of course, as your wife."

By
Ray Vicker

HANGMAN'S GOLD

The jump from cowpoke to hangman was a big one for Ran, and he little realized the mess he faced.

ONE town was just like another, and there wasn't anything in Horseshoe to hold Ran Stevens until he saw the girl in the telegraph office. Then there wasn't a thing that could lure him away. Even being broke didn't make any difference. Something would turn up. It always had. Meanwhile, a fellow had to go after what he wanted, and that's why he was in the telegraph office.

He took off his hat, passed a hand through his sandy hair. "Miss!" he said. "I hear the telegraph company wants men for their pole camp." The job was as good a way as any to open the conversation.

The girl turned on her stool, one hand resting beside the telegraph key on the desk that fitted into the station's alcove.

"They might be adding men later," she said. "But—"

He could see she hated to disappoint him. "But there's nothing now, eh?" he concluded for her.

She nodded. He took a deep breath, not because he was disappointed, but rather because this was the first chance he had to study the girl up close.

"Don't be downhearted," she said, misunderstanding the reason for his sigh. "Who knows? A job may open up tomorrow."

"I'm not disappointed," he said, and looked at her with such open admiration that she colored. "Fact is I'd rather pick up a job punchin' cows."

She was pretty, all right, in a cool sort of way that might have been discouraging were it not for a mouth that was built for smiling. In the grey light of this Wyoming day, her black hair had a sheen to it that matched the life in her dark eyes. He guessed she would measure up to his chin if she stood on her toes.

"You're new here, aren't you?" she said. Her voice showed an interest in him.

"I drifted in from Texas way, yesterday," he said. "Folks down there said this short grass country was a cowman's paradise."

"Do you think it is?" She slipped a quick glance at him, then pretended to be busy with a stack of telegrams on the counter.

Her friendliness put him at his ease. Suppose he was out of a job? He was still just as good as any man, and ready to prove it at the drop of a hat. A fellow had to go after things in this world that were worthwhile, and this girl was worth plenty.

"Yes. It's paradise," he said, boldly. "Leastwise it looks to me as if the women hereabouts are the closest to bein' angels of any I ever saw. What's your name, Miss?"

Her flush deepened. He could see she was pleased. "Why . . . ah . . . it's Eve. . . ." Her gaze passed over his shoulder, and she stopped short. A shadow darkened her features.

Ran looked around and saw Jack Larsen, the sheriff,

striding by, big body leaning against the wind that rattled store signs on Main Street, mackinaw collar so high around his face that little more than his red nose was visible.

"Eve, eh?" he said. "Then it's not paradise I stumbled into, it's the Garden of Eden." His smile faded, for the girl wasn't listening to him. She was staring after the sheriff as if she might have been seeing something on his back that corralled all her attention.

"What . . . what did you say?" she said, finally. "Did you say something?" She made a poor attempt at a smile.

"It was nothing," he said. "Nothing at all."

HE TURNED and headed into the street, thinking that the prettiest girls always seemed to have someone else's brand. He felt low enough to ride right out of town and forget he had ever seen a black-haired girl who could make his temperature climb ten degrees. He might have ridden out, too, if it were not for thinking of that tragic light in her eyes. That bothered him. She was in some kind of trouble and it concerned the sheriff. But did that mean the sheriff was her beau?

Thinking about the girl, Ran started aimlessly up the boardwalk. The wind drove him against the buildings, and he walked with hands tugging at his collar to keep the cold from his neck. It was only two o'clock, but kerosene lamps sparkled through frosted panes, and the men loading cattle into the boxcars beyond the station took turns standing by a huge bonfire that blazed brightly in the dusk.

In front of the postoffice, a sign caught Ran's attention. He halted, studied the notice.

"MAN WANTED—EASY MONEY DOING LIGHT WORK—APPLY AT MAYOR'S OFFICE."

A job! Just what he needed most. Maybe that girl *was* interested in the sheriff, but he had to stay to find out. A fellow never got anywhere by running away. Ran headed for the Town Hall.

There were only two men in the Mayor's office. One of them was Jack Larsen, so Ran concluded the other must be

the Mayor. He was a double-chinned, paunchy man with straying grey hair that had streaks of black, as if he might have recently quit using a hair dye.

"What in hell do you want?" he said by way of greeting to Ran, speaking around a black cigar in his mouth.

"Mayor Hale?" Ran looked coolly at the man.

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! An' I'm busy so make it short," the fat man said.

"I'm here about that job," Ran said. He took a quick glance at Larsen and wondered what Eve could ever see in the man.

From the vacant expression on Larsen's face, he seemed to have more brawn than brains. He didn't appear to be a man who washed regular, either, though judging from the redness of his nose, he had more than a passing acquaintance with the saloons in town.

"Job?" Mayor Hale stared at Ran. Then he rubbed his pudgy hands together and winked at Larsen. "Oh! *That* job!"

"Yeah!" Ran could feel his temper crowding him. He didn't like either of these gents. "Just what is this job?"

"We need a hangman for the county," Hale said, slowly.

"What?"

"Yeah!" Hale took a fingernail file and started filing his nails. "Larsen's only Actin' Sheriff, an' folks claim it ain't legal for him to perform an execution."

Ran smiled wryly. "Hangin's way out o' my line, Mister."

Hale's voice caught him. "The job pays a hundred dollars for one day's work."

Ran wheeled. "A hundred dollars! Three months' wages!"

"That's right," Hale said. "All you'd do is put a rope around this guy's neck an' spring the trap. It would be the easiest hundred dollars you ever earned."

RAN frowned. A hundred dollars could certainly put him on his feet in this town, and he needed to be on his feet to have a chance with the girl in the telegraph office. But hanging a man!

"Seems to me I heard somebody talkin' about this case at the livery," he said. "Wasn't there some doubts about the jasper's guilt?"

"None at all," Hale said. "My brother was the judge that sentenced him, and Larsen there was the jury foreman. That was before he was appointed to fill the sheriff's job, of course. This jasper's a killer who needs hangin'. You'd be doin' a public service if you did the job."

"Maybe that's the way to look at it," Ran said, slowly. He passed a hand across his lean jaw, thinking hard. After all, somebody had to hang killers. The fellow who took the hangman's job would be helping to make the town a better place to live in.

"Well?" Hale squinted at him.

"Okay!" Ran said. "I'll take the job."

"That's the spirit." Hale clapped Ran hard on the back. "Here's twenty dollars on account. The rest will be yours when you finish the job. You can bunk in the jail, tonight, and save puttin' up at the hotel."

Ran left the office as the official hangman for Hardrock County, four five-dollar gold pieces clinking in his pocket. He didn't relish the title, but the money could certainly help him take roots in town. That telegraph operator didn't look like a girl who'd take a shine to a drifting cowboy . . . unless that cowboy would settle down.

With Eve on his mind, he had dinner at the Shoshone Restaurant on Main Street, then hunted up a barber shop. Here he had his ears lowered with the clippers, and rented a zinc tub in the bathhouse behind the shop for an hour's soaking. When he dressed in his cleanest levis, he felt good enough to pay another visit to the telegraph office. After all, the only way he could help himself with the girl was by seeing as much of her as he could.

In the street, he could tell by the way folks glanced his way that news of his taking the hangman's job must be all over town. He was passing the jail when it occurred to him that it might be a good idea to have a look at the killer he was going to hang come tomorrow.

The cell corridor was gloomy, but Henderson was the

only prisoner in jail so he wasn't hard to find. He looked up when he saw Ran, forcing a smile that couldn't quite hide his nervousness.

"Hi, fellow," he said. "Got the makings?"

RAN passed his sack of tobacco through the bars. "Keep it," he said, studying this slim, wiry kid with the saddle-bowed legs. He had seen many kids just like this Jim Henderson riding point with a trail herd, or perhaps gathering dust in the drag. Henderson didn't look at all like the fellow a man expects to see heading toward a gallows.

Glancing through the barred window, Ran noticed the scaffold in the open lot, its gaunt frame grim in the fading light. Henderson's gaze followed his.

"That's what I have to look at all day," he said. "Nice view, ain't it? I complained to the management of this here hotel that I wanted a different room but it didn't do any good."

Ran forced a smile and tried to think of something to say. It didn't seem like good manners for a hangman to be chinning with the condemned man, though.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he said, finally. "Could I get you something?"

"Yeah! Sure! You can get me the key to this cell." Henderson laughed hard.

"I could get you a quart of forty-rod if it would do you any good."

"Naw, thanks. I don't drink." The kid smiled his appreciation. "I'd like a fast horse and a good head start, though."

He studied Ran a moment, then asked, "Say . . . who are you anyway?"

Ran cleared his throat. There wasn't any use lying. "I'm the fellow who's going to hang you, tomorrow."

"Huh!" Henderson stared. Then his lips curled as he said, "So! You're another o' the Mayor's hired killers. Do me a favor, will you, Mister? Stand in the light so I can get a good look at you. I've never met a real honest-to-

goodness hangman. I'd like to see what makes a fellow like you tick."

Ran's cheeks were hot when he walked away. He kept reminding himself that Henderson was a killer. So why should he worry about springing the trap? Yes, why?

In the office, he nodded to Larsen who had just come in, snow flakes on his mackinaw, his gruff features red with cold. "Listen, cowboy," Larsen said. "We may have a steady job for you when this hangin' is over. Hale is takin' over the Henderson Ranch through a tax foreclosure sale an' he'll be needin' some hands."

"The Henderson Ranch! Is that this kid's place?" Ran asked.

Larsen winked. "Yeah! He won't have no use for it after tomorrow."

OUTSIDE, darkness had fallen. A few flakes of dry snow spiraled in the air on each gust of wind. At the end of the street, the telegraph office's kerosene lamps threw a bright shine on the frozen station platform. Ran walked fast toward that light so that the cold wouldn't get too strong a hold on him, and his thoughts moved just as fast.

Maybe Henderson was a killer! But something seemed wrong here. Mayor Hale's brother had been the judge who conducted the trial, Larsen had been the jury foreman, and now Hale was taking over the kid's ranch. It all seemed too pat.

At the station, he rattled the door hard to attract attention as he entered. A touch of color entered the girl's cheeks. She was wearing a fur-trimmed hat and a beaver coat. A muff lay on the counter.

"Hello," she said, brushing a dark strand of hair under her hat. "I was just closing up." He could have sworn that there was a rise of interest in her voice, though her features remained solemn.

"I was hoping you would be." He tried to be nonchalant, but he could feel his own cheeks warm. "I'd like to see you home . . . if . . . if you don't mind, Miss Eve."

She gave him a long, close look. Hurriedly, he went on,

twisting his hat in his hands. "I picked up a job, an' I intend settlin' in this country, Miss. I . . . I . . ."

He thought of his job, and words wouldn't come. What would she say if she knew he was the official hangman for the county?

"You have a job? That's fine." Her warmth was genuine. She came around the counter, and some of her reserve was gone. "I suppose there's no harm in your showing me home. You see I'm staying at the boarding house across the street."

"Oh!" he said. "I'd hoped you lived clear on the other side o' town."

For the first time a full smile lit her features, wiping away that hint of tragedy about her lips. "Since we don't have a mutual friend to introduce us, my name is Eve Henderson."

"Folks call me Ran Stevens," he said, quickly. "I'm from—"

He stopped, stared at the girl. "Did you say Eve Henderson? Do you . . . are you related to Jim Henderson?"

THAT shadow again darkened her features. "Jim Henderson is my brother. He's . . . he's . . ." Her voice faltered. Then she lifted her chin and stared straight at him with no trace of tears in her eyes, no trace of any emotion at all.

"And you are Ran Stevens!" she said. "I should have known, for the whole town is talking about you. You are the man who is going to hang Jim, tomorrow."

"That's right. I mean . . . no!"

"You . . . you . . ." She fisted her tiny hands and would have struck him had he not caught her arms. Instead of trying to pull away, she held her ground, looking straight at him, anger drawing her features into tight lines.

"Wait!" he said. "I didn't know the kid was your brother. The Mayor told me he was a killer who needed hanging."

"Mayor Hale is the killer in this town. Jim is innocent. He's being railroaded to the gallows."

"Go on!" He released his grip on her.

"Hale has been running this town to suit himself. Jim is the only one who's been man enough to buck him. He's collected enough evidence of vote fraud to send Hale's entire gang to prison. That's why they are out to get him."

Eve stepped back from him, a slim, straight figure against the yellow lamplight of the station.

"But can't you appeal to the Governor if Jim is innocent?"

"We did. The Governor asked Judge Whipple for a recommendation, and Whipple is a Hale man. Jim's plea was turned down. But if Jim could only get to the Governor himself, I'm sure there'd be a general investigation of politics in the county."

She stopped short, and her tone was distant when she added, "But what good is it to tell you all this?"

She looked at him and through him, and seemed to withdraw into her beaver coat. Her stiff figure made a long shadow on the far wall of the station where the train schedules were posted.

"I'll tell you," he said. He reached for her, pulled her to him. "Because when you say Jim is being framed, it's got to be true . . . because I've got to help you . . . and because . . . because . . . it's you!"

He was holding her so close that he could feel the tremor pass through her body, through the feminine softness of her. There was a moment of resistance. Then he was kissing her, kissing her with all the fire that had been building up within him since he first set eyes on her. When he stepped back, he could hear her quick, unsteady breathing. Her eyes glistened in the lamplight, and she looked at him with a strange, wondering glance.

"Gosh!" he said. "Somebody ought to pin my ears back for that. Somebody should give me the whippin' I deserve."

She parted her lips as if to speak, but no words came. She continued to stare at him.

"Listen!" he said. "We've got to figure out a way to get Jim out of this."

That broke the spell surrounding her. "Yes! But how?"

"How? Well, I guess givin' Jim a chance to see the Governor would be as good a way as any. Could you have a fast saddle horse ready here in about fifteen minutes?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then have it ready."

SHE forced a wan smile as he went out. That made him all the more determined to see that Jim didn't hang tomorrow. Ducking into an alley behind the row of buildings fronting Main Street, he worked his way to the rear of the jail. He was under Jim's window when a beefy hombre swung around a corner of the building, a Winchester in hands.

"Hold it!" The man leveled his rifle at Ran. "What are you doin' here?"

Ran yawned and stretched himself. "I'm headin' for my bunk in jail," he said.

"Oh! You're the hangman. The Mayor told us about you." The guard's rifle sagged. "Go ahead, but you better not come this way again. You might get shot before you're recognized."

"I'll remember that," Ran said, heading for the front of the building. It looked as if he'd have to boldly stage the jail break instead of slipping a gun to Jim as he had intended. This complicated matters, for he had told Eve to have but one horse ready.

The three hard-faced men playing poker beside the pot-bellied stove scarcely paid him any attention. Their casualness faded when Ran whipped out his revolver and covered them.

"All right!" he said. "Head for the cell block."

One of them, a tall fellow with stooped shoulders and mournful features, appeared as if he might be weighing the possibility of trying for the gun on his hip. He looked at the revolver in Ran's hand, and that long expression on his face lengthened.

"Looks like you're holdin' all the aces," he said. He shrugged and started for the cell block. That took all the fight out of the others and they followed, not making any

objections as the door of a cell clanged shut behind them.

Henderson's cigarette was a red glow in the darkness when Ran pressed his face against the bars, jail keys in his hand. "Come on, kid! You're gettin' out of here," he said.

Henderson's cigarette brightened in the gloom. "But how—"

"Never mind! Come on!" Ran swung the door open.

As he and Jim burst into the street, they collided with a heavy-set guard who had two guns and a voice strong enough to carry half way across town. He used that voice when he recognized Jim. Then he went for his guns.

"This way!" Ran shouted, plunging into the darkness of the jail yard. Jim pounded at his heels. The guard triggered a shot but already the scaffold was affording them some cover. Several more shots sounded behind them. Then they were in the alley behind Main Street, boots churning gravel.

LIGHTS were flashing on all over town when they reached the cattle-pen. Behind them in the corrals, cattle moved restlessly, hooves stomping the frozen ground. The depot would have been almost invisible in the darkness and swirling snow were it not for the brightness of the square window panes. A single saddle horse was hitched to a baggage truck, head low, rump turned to the stinging wind. Eve waited in the gloom.

"Here!" Ran thrust his gun into Jim's hand. "Get on that horse, and git!"

Jim swept Eve into his arms as she came running forward, held her for a brief moment, and swung into saddle. He lifted a hand in farewell, then he was away. Ran listened to the fading echoes of the hoofbeats, the wind a steady rush on his face, Eve so close he could have wrapped an arm about her.

She stirred beside him. "What about you?" she asked. "Hale will kill you if he finds you now."

The lash of the wind was so strong she had to lift her voice to reach him. The smell of coal smoke from the roundhouse rode on the air, and the switch engine in the

yards threw a thin beam of light into the cloud of snowflakes, its bell ringing with a muffled, dead sound.

"My best chance is the railroad," he said. "When is the next train due?"

"The westbound express will be coming by in an hour," she said. "It stops on signal."

"Good," he said. He didn't like the idea of running, but under the circumstances he had to make tracks away from Hale and Sheriff Larsen in a hurry. It might be three or four days before Jim could hope to stir up an investigation. Meanwhile, Hale would have the run of the town.

Inside the telegraph office, the single lamp on the counter threw a faint light on the yellow walls—a light that touched Eve in a pale glow, bringing out the warmth and tenderness in her eyes. He stepped closer to her, drawn by that glance, trying to understand what lay beneath her stare. The room's heat was melting the snow on her coat, and she brushed at the water, breaking her glance.

"Eve!" he said, drawing closer to her. The wind rattled the door against the latch and the draft sucked at the lamp, dimming the flame to a thin, wavering flicker. Was it that lamp which was making the room tremble before his eyes?

"Yes?" Again she looked at him with that strange light in her eyes. A smile brightened her features—a rich and glowing smile that held its hint of promise.

HE TOOK her in his arms, found a warm responsiveness that whipped heady excitement through him. For a moment he held her like that, a wisp of her hair in his face, her lips close to his. Then he whirled at the sound of harsh voices outside, the sharp clap of hooves on icy ground, of hard footsteps. The door burst open.

Mayor Hale stood on the sill, his bearskin coat making him a huge and grotesque shape, his frosted breath coming in short gasps that were audible in the stillness of the room. Jack Larsen crowded the mayor's heels, face reddened by the wind, the dull light in his eyes rising to a

glow when he saw Ran. Two of Larsen's hard-faced deputies were behind him.

"Well! So here's our hangman," Hale said. There was an ironic gleam in his eyes. He threw back the collar of his coat with a brusque sweep of his pudgy hand, and his thick-lidded eyes passed a signal to the men behind him. There was a shuffling of boots as the men spread out, forming a semi-circle with Ran in the center.

Ran shoved Eve away from him, toward the counter. His hand dropped to his holster and he remembered he had given his gun to Jim. Alone and unarmed, he faced the Mayor's party.

Hale's eyes made a beady glow in the thin light of the counter lamp. "You're under arrest, Stevens," he said. "Assistin' a prisoner to escape is a serious offense in this state."

"Is it?" Ran knew he had to make some kind of bluff. It was his only chance. Once Hale had him in jail there would be little chance of his walking out again. "I'm afraid you boys will be singing a different tune once Jim Henderson gets the Governor's ear."

Ran forced a grin and looked at Larsen. "If I were you, Sheriff, I'd be hightailin' it outta here on a fast horse. It's you who may be doin' the swingin', not Henderson."

Larsen licked his lips and cast a sidelong glance at Hale.

"Shut up!" Hale said. "I'm runnin' this town, an' I'll continue to run it, too." His voice was thin and hard, like the rush of wind that rattled the roof.

Ran's smile broadened. "Why do you suppose I came to Horeshoe in the first place?" he said. He paused a moment, letting that question sink in. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe the Governor sent me here to have a look into what was goin' on? Did it ever occur to you that maybe there's enough evidence in certain places right now to send all of you to jail for a long spell?"

Larsen had been unbuttoning his mackinaw. His fingers froze on a button as if tightly glued to the buffalo bone surface. Temper stirred Hale's features. He took a step forward like a huge enraged bull.

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe you wouldn't be walkin' out of here?" Hale said, making no effort to keep his voice down.

RAN threw a quick glance at Eve, and he knew by the paleness of her cheeks that she was aware of the way things were heading. Weakly she leaned against the counter, one hand close to the lamp. In that fraction of a second when his eyes were fixed on her, he saw her hand inch along the counter toward the lamp's base.

"This is the way I handle anybody who gets in my way," Hale said. A Colt gleamed dully in his hand.

From the corner of his eye, Ran saw Eve sweep the lamp from the counter, and fall forward. Sudden darkness enveloped the room. Ran threw himself to the floor, rolling to one side as a revolver blasted its thunder of sound. Other guns roared. Lead ripped through the wooden walls and gunsmoke bit at his nostrils. Ran hugged the floor in the darkness, afraid to breath lest he give away his position. There was a faint glow in the room from the stove, and he knew it would be only a little time before eyes would become accustomed to the gloom. Then they'd spot him for sure.

"Did we get him?" It was Larsen's voice, tense and urgent.

"Shut up!" Hale's voice wasn't more than three feet from Rand.

"I don't like this at all," one of the deputies said from a far corner. "A detective ain't nobody to fool with. There'll be more comin' to find out what happened to this one. We'd better make tracks, an' soon."

"Shut up!" Hale swore, and edged forward a few inches, the scraping of his boots sounding very close to Ran's head. Ran crouched on all fours, ready to spring. Hale's gun might be pointed straight at him if he leaped forward, but he had to take that chance. In another moment, the stove might send up a flare of light that would break through the darkness.

With a yell, he hurled himself at Hale, shoulder striking

the big man's middle. A bullet whipped his hat from his head. A revolver cracked painfully against his hand as Hale flailed his arms. Shoving hard, he drove Hale backwards, grabbed air when he lunged for him. He again dropped to the floor as he realized Hale had slipped from his grasp.

"There he is!" somebody shouted. The roar of exploding guns filled the room.

"No! No!" Hale made a choking sound. There was the heavy thud of a falling body, then silence. Outside, men were yelling and calling to each other. There was the stomp of many boots coming fast up the walk.

"I'm clearin' outta here," one of the deputies said.

"Me, too," said Larsen.

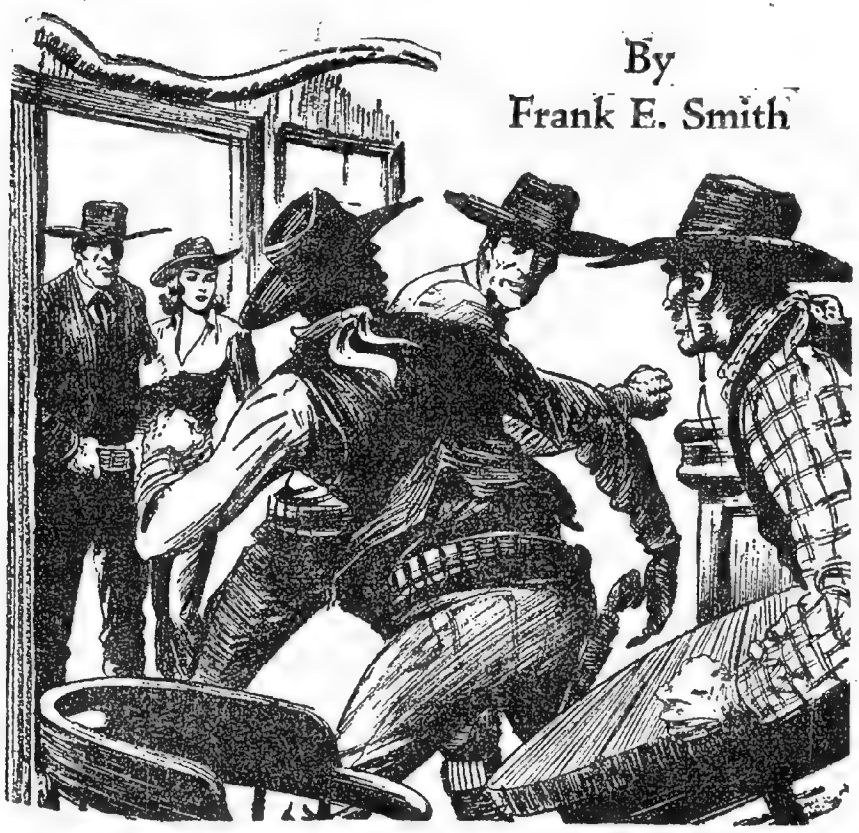
The door opened, letting a flood of cold air into the station. Snow hit Ran's face. In that vague light, he thought he saw three shadows going through the door in a hurry. Then people were swarming inside, calling to each other, cautiously edging further into the station. Somebody struck a match to a lantern, and light filled the room.

Hale sprawled in a heap on the floor, a still shape. Gunsmoke swirled in the room, riding on the draft from the open door.

The sight of the Mayor on the floor seemed to give the townspeople the courage they lacked when Hale was alive. Men clapped Ran on the back and began talking about forming a posse to round up what was left of Hale's crew. Everybody was ready to admit now that Hale had been a crook all along, with Jim Henderson one of his innocent victims. When the crowd finally trooped out of the station, Ran had three offers of jobs to consider.

"Did you hear that, Eve?" he asked. "Now I can tender my resignation as county hangman and do something more respectable."

"Yes!" she said, a shine in her eyes when she turned her face upward to meet his kiss. "I don't like the idea of becoming a hangman's wife, though you could probably talk me into it, if you wanted to. Yes! I guess you could talk me into anything!"



By
Frank E. Smith

SIX-GUNS BE DAMNED!

Grayson was determined to clear his name back in Concha City, and he meant to do it without any shooting.

EVERY muscle in his tall, saddle-gaunt body was raked with searing, throbbing torture. But still he stumbled on, hand on the black's hackamore, feeling the burning weight of the sand tugging at his boots. This was the second day without water, and now his thirst-crazed mind no longer invented mirages against the shimmering rim of the desert.

The black lurched against him. Jim Grayson's lean,

flat-planed face twisted in a grimace of pain as he staggered and clutched at the saddle horn, choking back the nausea that retched up in his parched throat. He leaned his weight against the horse a moment, thinking of the man he had killed back there in Concha City. That man had died instantly, not in slow agony like this. Feeling as he did, death would have been a welcome thing.

Grayson's gun belt was draped across the saddle. He reached up weakly and slipped the worn .44 from its holster. He had scarcely strength enough to thumb back the trigger and lay the muzzle behind the black's ear.

His words hissed breathlessly through swollen lips.

"It's no use, old-timer. We're cashin' in. . . ."

The gun was heavy. Too heavy. He felt it slipping from fumbling fingers. The desert tilted and swayed beneath him. As he fell, Grayson's red-rimmed blue eyes swept upward and once again he saw the buzzards wheeling patiently in the orange haze that was the sky.

Darkness closed in and he lay still.

GRAYSON awoke with a nightmarish feeling of not knowing where he was. He jerked to a sitting position, eyes darting around the strange room. He was on a bunk in a littered one-room shack. A grizzled oldster with sunburned bald head and straggly white beard peered at him from behind a rough pine table on the far side of the small room. He was in the act of filling a tin cup from a quart bottle of whiskey. He grunted, crossed to the bunk and pushed the cup toward Grayson.

"It's about time," he said in a cracked voice. "Fer awhile I figured yuh wuz a goner."

Grayson waved the whiskey away. He said weakly, "How'd you come to find me?"

"Me an' my burro's out in that desert all the time, son, huntin' fer a little color." He shrugged. "Ain't the first time Sully Tate's cheated the buzzards."

"How long've I been here?"

"Six days."

Grayson ran his fingers across the lower portions of

his face. "I've got to get my strength back, Sully. There's somethin' I got to do."

Sully Tate cackled. "Yore safe here, boy. I know yore story. Yuh had a fever, purty nigh talked yore head off!" He took a sip of the whiskey. "So yuh gunned a gent in Concha City over his molestin' yore gal, name o' Debra. The way yuh tell it, she must be the purtiest critter on two laigs." He grinned at Grayson expectantly. Grayson said nothing.

Tate's voice droned on. "Yuh said yuh got boogered after the shootin', seein' as how folks in town are purty set agin gun fightin' anymore, and lit out across the desert without even fillin' a canteen." He tugged reflectively at his white beard. "But whut about this Rudy Prince feller yuh kept mumblin' about? 'Pears he's dead agin yuh marryin' up with Miss Debra. Whut's he got to say in this here matter anyway?"

Grayson's jaw ridged at the mention of the name, but he shook his head, said nothing. When he finally spoke, it was to change the subject.

"I owe you my life, Sully," he said quietly. "How'd you pull me through?"

The old man fished a small tin box from his frayed levis and thumbed back the lid. "Good fer anything," he said reverently, looking down at several large, yellowish pills. "Got 'em from a hoss-doctor once when my burro took sick. Cured yuh jist as good as they did him." He wagged his bald head. "Mighty powerful!"

Grayson forced a grin. "How soon you think I'll be fit to ride back?" he asked.

Sully's eyes widened. "See here, now! I thought yuh wuz runnin' away!"

"I was a fool to run in the first place. But out there in the desert I did a heap of thinkin'. I'd never killed before. I made myself an oath, Sully—never to throw down on a man again."

Sully studied Grayson's face. "That sun musta cooked yore brain."

"Maybe. But I'm goin' back. I can't keep running like

a rat all my life. They'll give me a trial and a chance." His voice softened. "And there's Debra."

"And this here Rudy Prince," Sully Tate said acidly. "This rival of your'n. He'll be standin' up and cheerin' fer yuh. . . ?"

"It's something I have to do," Grayson said.

FOUR days later, astride the black, Grayson rode into Concha City just as the sun reached its zenith. Heat lay over the deserted street like a stifling blanket, sucking the breath from his lips as he quartered across the wagon ruts toward the false front of Sam Chaney's barber shop. He hitched the black at the tie-rail, crossed the plank walk and pushed through the screen door.

Sam Chaney, long-faced and hawk-nosed, was alone in his shop, dozing in the barber chair. Grayson stepped close and shook his shoulder.

"Chaney," he said, "I'm lookin' for Marshal Brady. You seen him?"

Sam Chaney's bright eyes blinked open. A smile started across his long face, then faded and died, and in its place there was alarm. He slid quickly from his chair and took two fast steps away from Grayson.

Grayson stared at him. "What the hell, Chaney?"

Chaney coughed nervously. "Brady's probably next door at the Border Belle," he said shortly.

"Thanks," Grayson muttered. Doubt gnawed at the back of his mind as he turned and left the shop. Brady's reaction had shaken him. This was the thing he had feared—that he had turned even his friends against him. If all of Concha City felt the way Sam Chaney did. . . .

His eyes lifted across the dusty street just as Debra Carson turned into the doorway of the Mercantile. He had only a momentary glimpse of a small oval face with full red lips and laughing grey eyes before the screen door closed behind her lithe young figure, but the sight of her had brought memories flooding back and now he stood with a strange pounding in his chest, his fingers clinched hard. Then he turned quickly and shouldered through

the bat-wings into the cool dimness of the Border Belle.

There were a dozen men scattered along the bar, but the marshal was not among them. Grayson found a space and motioned to the bartender, ignoring the surprised looks of the early drinkers. He said, "Marshal Brady been in, Barney?"

Barney slid a beer toward him, swallowed hard. His round face held the expression of a man who wished he were some place else. "Not yet. Expect him, though." He swabbed at the bar with a towel, his face working. "You figure to wait for him—here?"

"If it's all the same to you, Barney—" From the corner of his eye he saw the puncher beside him shoot him a strange look and move his bottle and glass further down the bar.

"Suit yourself," Barney said and walked away.

So this is the way it is, Grayson thought. *These are the people who'll try me. Hell, I'm as good as hanged!"*

A SOFT, TAUNTING laugh sounded behind him. Grayson's fingers tightened around his glass until the knuckles showed white. He'd hated that laugh as long as he'd known Rudy Prince. Rumor had it that Prince had made his living by his gun before he came to Concha City. But shortly after he'd hit town a relative back east had willed him enough money to spend all his nights bucking the tables and soaking up red-eye at the Border Belle. He fancied himself a devil with the ladies, and when his play for Debra Carson had been soundly repulsed, he had tried every ornery trick he knew to break up her engagement to Grayson.

Grayson studied him now in the yellowed bar mirror as the ex-gunslick swaggered up beside him. He was a tall man, taller even than Grayson, with slicked-down black hair and thin black sideburns. His arrogant, heavy-jowled face was flushed with liquor. He wore an immaculate fawn-colored suit, the coat of which hung away to reveal a flowered vest and low-tied, silver-mounted .45.

"Hello—*hero,*" Prince purred.

Grayson said nothing. The bartender put bottle and glass before Prince and backed away. Prince poured a drink, lifted it toward Grayson. "To boothill, hero," he said, just loud enough to carry the full length of the bar.

"Prince," Grayson said tightly, "your brand of humor ain't exactly fittin'."

Prince's cloudy hazel eyes widened in mock surprise. "No? Well, now, that's too bad. I thought you'd be right proud of your new rep with a six-gun." He sloshed another drink into his glass. He sniffed the air, looked around him questioningly.

"Hey! Any of you boys smell a polecat around here?"

Down the bar a man chuckled, and another. Then the big room was ominously quiet, except for the nervous scrape of a boot on the sawdust littered floor.

Grayson wet his lips, choking back the angry retort that came to them. He was remembering the oath he had made out there in the hell-hot desert. He stared straight ahead into the bar mirror, and in it he saw two men enter the saloon and move toward them. Marshal Carl Brady and Sam Chaney, the barber.

Rudy Prince made a wry face. "Polecats!" he grated. "Never could stand 'em. Two-legged or otherwise!" He drained his glass, wiped his mouth on the back of a broad-knuckled hand.

"Well, hero," he said contemptuously. "At least you won't have to worry none about Debra Carson. That gal's goin' to be mighty well taken care of." His voice was taunting. "You know what I mean, Grayson?"

JIM GRAYSON set his glass down on the bar, slowly, carefully, his lips peeling away from tight-set teeth. There was but one thing to do now. He unbuckled his gun belt and extended it to Marshal Carl Brady.

"I reckon you can wait for me a mite longer, Marshal," he said. "This might be my last frolic."

Rudy Prince said something, but Grayson never heard it. He had driven his fist hard into Prince's face, slamming him back against the bar. Blood spurted from Prince's

nose. Kill-fever lights sprang into his close-set hazel eyes. Cursing, he lunged forward, fists blurring in Grayson's face. Grayson felt one of those fists sink into his stomach. Another crashed against his jaw. He shook his head, tried to sidestep. Another crushing blow against his cheek bone—and he was down.

Grayson slithered away from Prince's boots and lurched dizzily to his feet. He knew now he had been a fool. He had ridden in to Concha City almost too weak to sit his horse, and now he was fighting a man who would kill him just as cheerfully with his fists as with a gun.

Prince lunged toward him, his face like an animal's, but this time Grayson set his feet and lowered his head and bored in on the bigger man like a buzz saw on a log. All his pentup hate exploded in one maddened rush that forced Prince back and back, until he was pinned against the bar. The gunslick snarled through crushed, blood-flecked lips. His hand blurred toward the silver-mounted .45.

Grayson's boot arced out and up. The gun, half drawn, went flying from Prince's hand and crashed into the mirror behind the bar in a shower of glass. Grayson closed in, his fists pounding against Prince's face in a last desperate attack of savage rights and lefts. Only when he was certain that the sheer fury of his blows was all that kept Prince upright did Grayson step away. Prince pitched forward on his face like a fallen tree and lay there motionless.

Grayson sucked breath into his lungs, wiped blood from his face with his bandanna. He heard the shouting of the men around him and the bitter thought came to him that a few moments before these same men had shunned him. He turned to Marshal Carl Brady.

"Brady," he said. "I'm back to take what's comin'."

Brady shoved his Stetson back from a forelock of iron-grey hair. His level ice-blue eyes shuttled between Grayson and the sprawled figure of Rudy Prince.

"You got somethin' comin' at that, son," he said dryly. "But likely it ain't exactly what you figured." He spat a

stream of tobacco juice into the sawdust near Prince's feet.

Grayson stared at him a long moment. "What do you mean?"

"Yore lucky. That gent you gunned was wanted in Missouri for holdin' up a bank. Got a dodger on him a couple days ago. You got a little dinero comin' your way, I reckon."

"You mean there's no charge against me?"

BRADY said slowly, "Not this time, bucko. But, mind you, we got another new law in this town. A man even *draws* a gun, he goes to the pokey." He spat again. "Prince was hopin' you'd draw, so he could use his gun savvy. But you was smart enough not to. The way it stands, Prince is goin' to be sweatin' in the hoosegow."

Grayson looked about him, swallowed hard. "But everybody was actin' like—"

"Cain't blame 'em," the marshal broke in. "Not smellin' the way you do.'

"Smell?"

"Like a polecat," Brady said, and turned toward Rudy Prince.

Sam Chaney, the barber, cleared his throat. "I been doin' a little thinkin' about that—er—aroma, Grayson," he said. "Only thing could cause it is sulphur. You been takin' medicine?"

Grayson's thoughts whipped back to the yellow pills the old prospector had administered to him. "Yes," he said, and described them to the hawk-nosed little barber.

"Sulphur, all right," Sam Chaney said. "Bad thing about sulphur is it works out of a man's system so gradual he can't notice it himself. But everybody else sure can!"

Suddenly Grayson found himself laughing. "So that's why you jaspers was actin' so cussed proddy!"

Men crowded about him, holding their noses with one hand and slapping his back with the other. But their yells left no doubt about the way they felt.

"Well," Grayson said. "Right now I got me an awful hankerin' to see a certain young lady. I'm goin' to—"

Sam Chaney guffawed. "Smellin' like *that,* Grayson? Why, you'd spook her sure!"

Grayson swore softly. "Reckon you're right."

"You got nothin' to worry about," Sam Chaney said. He grabbed Grayson by the arm and hustled him from the Border Belle to his barber shop next door. Before Grayson could object, Chaney had jerked the cap from a quart bottle of rosewater and drenched him with it.

"There!" Chaney said. "Now you don't smell like a polecat no more!"

The heavy, stupefying sweetness of the rosewater took Grayson's breath away. He felt his eyes begin to water.

"You know," he gasped. "Danged if I wouldn't rather!"

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By
Elmer Kelton

Bullets from the Past

Sinister ghosts of a former killing arose to plague Andy Webb, and threatened to ruin his life.

BIG ANDY WEBB looked regretfully at the old doctor who stood just inside the front door of the saddle-shop. Straightening his tall frame, he laid aside the bridle he had been making and rubbed his hands on trousers that had been worn out long ago.

"I hate to keep puttin' you off like this, Doc, but I haven't got a thing to pay you with."

The young saddlemaker glanced quickly at his little son, a sandy-haired youngster who sat on a bench, tongue on his upper lip, while he laboriously platted a quirt.

"You know how I stand with the bank, now that old Eli has come out and took it over. Next week Jimmy and I won't even have this shop, the way it looks now."

Doc Brooks nodded. "Sure, Andy, this drouth's been

hard on everybody." He blinked away sand in his eyes, blown there by a dust devil on the dry, powdery street.

"But I've got a chance to buy some new medical equipment and set up a better office. It might let me save a few lives that would be lost otherwise. Like your wife's was, Andy. If I could collect even a third of the bills owed me, I could have what I need, Andy," the wrinkled old doctor went on. "If things lighten up for you, I'd sure appreciate you payin' what you can." Doc Brooks hated asking for his money, but circumstances forced him to.

WHEN the old man had hobbled back out onto the rickety plank sidewalk, Big Andy went to work on the bridle again. A dry, hot breeze brought him the listless music of a tinny piano in the saloon next door. His gaze kept returning fondly to little Jimmy's freckled face, clean, honest, and eager. It hadn't been so many years since Andy had been Jimmy's size. He was glad his son would never go through the same kind of boyhood. Andy had grown up motherless in outlaw camps up and down the Texas Panhandle. His father's name had been blazed on reward notices and dodgers all over the country. Andy was only fifteen when his dad's horse had trotted into camp alone, saddle empty but smeared with blood.

The orphan had become a skilled cowboy, but with other people's cows. Then, when Andy was only twenty, a man had died in a blaze of gunfire. It wasn't Andy's gun, but Andy had gotten the blame. He had headed south in the dark of the moon.

Always expert with leather, he had become a harness and saddle maker. Eventually he had learned to love a girl and had married her. Fine craftsmanship had made his new name known all over West Texas. Then Alice had died, and the drouth had begun. Rains had failed. Hot winds had turned grassland into powder, breaking ranchmen first, then townsmen in turn.

Now here Andy was, hardly thirty, awaiting the foreclosure that would put him and his eight-year-old son out on the trail. He was wistfully watching the youngster

smooth out the quirt when a shadow fell across the floor. It was a big shadow, a round one.

"Better get a lot of trinkets ready for the rodeo crowd that's coming in tomorrow, Webb."

Hot, angry blood rose in Andy as he recognized the insolent voice of banker Eli Fuller. Defiantly he stood up and faced the sharp Easterner who had come to profit from the drouth.

"Get out of here, Fuller," he gritted, "or I'll cram that cigar down your fat throat!"

Little Jimmy stood up in alarm, then darted out the door.

"Now don't get mad, Webb," the banker mocked. "I just wanted to see how my shop is getting along."

Andy bristled. "It ain't your shop yet. Now drag your fat carcass out of here!"

Fuller smiled condescendingly, his teeth bearing down on a long cigar which stuck up out of his mouth at a jaunty angle. "You shouldn't talk like that, Webb. If you'd be reasonable, I might even keep you on as an employee."

Outlaw heat surged through Big Andy. He lunged at the banker and drove a hard fist into the man's soft belly. The cigar dropped from Fuller's thick lips and rolled down his bulging vest, showering ashes and fire. The banker held up his soft hands defensively as Andy grabbed his collar.

Then a young woman burst through the door. "Stop it, Andy. For heaven's sake, stop it!"

Big Andy had doubled his fist again, but he slowly loosened it. The woman's alarmed blue eyes were opened wide. She gripped Andy's arms.

"Let him go, Andy," she pleaded. "Things are bad enough without you getting yourself in jail."

The fury in him began to subside. "All right, Mary," he said. "But Fuller better not come back in here."

The banker slowly backed toward the door, face flushed and belly bouncing a little over his low-slung belt.

"You won't be so independent next week, Webb," Fuller threatened, a tremor in his voice. "If you stay in this town, I'll see that you starve!"

An angry, helpless curse in his throat, Andy stepped forward. Mary Wilson gripped his arms again. Excitement had put scarlet in the young woman's cheeks and given her blue eyes a deep color. Her oval face seemed beautiful as she looked up at him pleadingly.

"My dad's in the same shape with the bank as you are, Andy," she said. "But even Jimmy knows you can't afford to fight Fuller. He came after me. And it's certainly a good thing he did."

Any other time Andy would have grinned. "He always knows right where to go, doesn't he?"

She smiled faintly. "Even if I *am* his schoolteacher, Jimmy likes me."

Big Andy put his hands on her slender shoulders. A new, tender warmth rose in him. "So does his dad."

THERE was something familiar about the tall, rugged man who strode into the shop and stood squinting at Andy. The saddlemaker frowned unbelievingly at the scarred face, then murmured darkly: "Rocky! Rocky Mertzon!"

The tall man smiled thinly, a black gap showing between his tobacco-stained teeth. "Howdy, Andy. Haven't seen you since you left the Panhandle on a fast horse." He extended a weather-roughened hand. Andy hesitated a moment, then took it with cool civility.

"Thought you were in the pen," Andy ventured carefully.

"I was, a long time ago," Mertzon said, a smile twisting his wind-whipped face. "But I got tired of it."

Big Andy watched suspiciously as Mertzon's darting black eyes took in the shop. "I was hopin' I'd never see any of that old bunch again, Rocky. I'm sorry you found me."

Mertzon grinned crookedly. "Nice setup you got here, Andy. Too bad you're goin' to lose it. I've heard all about it. And I been figgerin' out a way to help you and me both at the same time."

Andy paused uncertainly. He picked up his son's unfin-

ished quirt, then put it down on the bench while Mertzon built a cigarette.

"Those old days are behind me, Rocky. If it's somethin' crooked, I don't want any part of it."

The outlaw frowned. "You ain't in much shape to bargain. Look here, Andy, you got a bank on one side of you and a saloon on the other. A perfect setup. With the rodeo that starts tomorrow, there's apt to be a lot of money layin' around in that bank. And with the crowd that'll be here, the sheriff ain't goin' to pay much attention to one stranger."

Mertzon's slitted gaze probed Big Andy's eyes for a sign of interest. "I'll wait around on rodeo day till there ain't any customers in the bank. Then I'll clean the place out and leave through the back door. You'll have your back window open, Andy, and I'll pitch the loot through it as I run by. Then I'll go in the back door of the saloon and be mixed up with the crowd before anybody has a chance to git after me."

The outlaw grinned. "That fat banker has a standin' reward of one thousand dollars for any bank robber, dead or alive. When I git through, he won't *have* that much!"

Eagerly Mertzon leaned forward. "I'll give *you* a thousand out of whatever I git, Andy. And all you have to do is leave your back window open."

TEMPTATION boiled in Big Andy. A thousand dollars! That would more than pay what he owed Fuller, if he could figure out a way to explain where he got it. And he could pay Doc Brooks the money he had owed him ever since Alice had died.

But Big Andy shook his head. "I quit that kind of business a long time ago. I'll go hungry before I take a chance on leadin' my son through the kind of life *I* had!"

Mertzon scowled. "Maybe you'd like me to spread the word about the old days in the Panhandle. That'd really fix your kid up!"

An old fear made Andy's heart beat faster. "I've spent more than ten years tryin' to live that down. I've worked

up a reputation that Jimmy could be proud of. You wouldn't take that away from me, would you, Rocky?"

Mertzon looked up with a cruel grin.

"The Weaver brothers up around Tascosa are still wonderin' what became of you. They got a funny idea it was you that killed Tom Weaver."

Andy's heart jumped. "That's a lie! *You* shot Tom Weaver! I wasn't even there!"

Mertzon still grinned crookedly. "Sure, but the Weavers *thought* it was you. Still do. Maybe you'd like a chance to prove to 'em different."

Pulse racing and his face stove-lid hot, Andy dived for a drawer in which he knew would be a pistol. But even as his sweaty hand touched the gun butt, he felt Mertzon's .45 poking him in the ribs.

"That's a fool play, Andy," Mertzon growled. "You been goin' straight too long. All you would've done was make an orphan out of that kid."

Defeated, Big Andy slowly settled back against the work bench. His heart thumped rapidly. His mouth was dry.

"I'll pull the job tomorrow," Mertzon said. "Have that window open. And if you git any ideas about crossin' me up, just remember the Weavers."

He holstered his gun, stepped out into the street, and was gone.

THE next day, standing in the front door of his shop, Andy watched the occasional tiny dust devils whip across the powdery street. A small but steady stream of riders kept a thin haze of dust hanging in the air. The rodeo was bringing its crowd. Andy's hands were wet with nervous perspiration, and a nameless tension tied his innards in a knot. Where was Rocky Mertzon? If he had to pull his robbery, why didn't he come on and get it over with?

Andy watched as his son and a group of boys romped gaily down the dusty street, playing cowboy. There was a fresh patch in the seat of Jimmy's worn trousers. No question about who had made the repairs, Andy thought with a

twinge of conscience. Mary Wilson mothered the boy like he was her own.

His heart warmed then as he saw the young schoolteacher coming down the wooden sidewalk. Her pretty face beamed.

"Dad *did* it, Andy!" she exclaimed. "Dad *did* it. He found a buyer for his cattle. He had to cut way down into his breeding herd, but he got enough money to pay off Fuller's note on the ranch."

He managed to grin with her. "What did Fuller say when you all paid him off?"

"He wasn't in. We deposited the money with the teller. We'll pay Fuller later."

Andy's grin faded as a sobering thought struck him. What if Rocky Mertzon robbed the bank before Mary's father could pay the debt? He would get the Wilsons' money, and the mortgage would still stand. Fuller would take the ranch.

Sick at heart, Andy moved to his bench and sat down. It wouldn't be just the Wilsons, either, he told himself. The bank money didn't belong to Fuller only. It belonged to depositors from all over the area—friends of Andy's—who were trying to pay their debts and still live like human beings.

Andy could see old Charlie Wilson across the street, joyfully slapping Sheriff Bronson on the back. He thought of Jimmy. What if the truth were guessed, and Andy had to go on the dodge? What about Jimmy?

DESPAIRINGLY the saddlemaker watched fat Eli Fuller swagger past on his way to the bank. Nerves tingling, Andy rubbed his sweating hands against each other for what seemed like hours. He couldn't let this go on. He had to stop it!

He reached into the drawer, hauled out the six-gun, and shoved it into a boottop, out of sight. Then he strode grimly out onto the sidewalk. He spotted Rocky Mertzon sitting on a bench in front of the saloon. Big Andy gestured at Mertzon with his chin, then walked back through

the shop and into the rear room. As Mertzon came in a minute later, Big Andy lifted his foot and snaked out the gun.

"You're not goin' through with it, Rocky," he declared, the gun leveled at Mertzon's chest. "I'll leave town tonight. I'll risk my name bein' smeared, and I'll risk the Weavers. But you're not robbin' that bank!"

Angry red flamed in Mertzon's eyes. "You're mighty righteous for a feller whose old man robbed half the banks in Texas." For a heated moment hatred glared from his narrowed eyes. Then he slowly turned around, as if giving up. Big Andy lowered the gun a little.

Suddenly Mertzon whirled back and grabbed at the gun. In a second he wrenched it from Andy's hand. Big Andy threw a hand up defensively as he saw the glint of the slashing gun barrel. Something exploded in his head. He dropped to his knees, the shop reeling before his eyes.

"You're not fast enough for me, Big Andy," Mertzon snarled. "You never was!"

There was a second of blinding pain as the gun barrel struck him again. Then there was only darkness.

HE BECAME conscious of soft hands wiping his face with a wet cloth. His head throbbed dully, and he grimaced at a sickening taste in his mouth.

He forced his eyes open and saw Mary kneeling over him. Painfully he lifted himself up onto his elbows. He could see a red stain on the wet cloth.

"What happened, Andy?" she asked in alarm.

"Somebody slugged me," he told her painfully. "Help me up."

As he struggled to keep his feet, Mary quickly told him that Jimmy had come back to the shop to get his quirt for play. He had found his father in the back room, unconscious. His first thought had been to run to Mary.

"We've got to get you to Doc Brooks," she said with concern.

Andy shook his throbbing head. "No, I've got to see the sheriff. Right now!"

Leaning on the slender girl for support, he started for the front. Then two shots exploded in the bank next door. Despair choked Andy like a giant hand clasped around his throat. In his excitement he felt his strength returning. He and Mary got to the bank a few seconds before the sheriff did.

Acrid gunpowder stung his nostrils. The room was cloudy with choking smoke, which slowly swirled upward toward the high ceiling. The back door was open. Then Andy saw the excited bank teller kneeling beside fat Eli Fuller. Moaning, the banker lay sprawled on the floor, one flabby hand clutching at a bleeding shoulder. A chewed-up cigar, one end still smoking, lay beside him.

"The back door!" boomed Sheriff Bronson's voice. Andy moved to the door ahead of the lawman and stepped out into the alley. No one there!

The old lawman cursed. "Got clean away, Andy! He must've had a plenty fast horse!"

Guilt lay heavy in Andy as he followed the somber sheriff back into the bank. The ashen-faced teller was gesturing nervously and recounting the incident to the gathering crowd.

"Mr. Fuller seemed to lose all reason when the masked man took the money. He grabbed at a gun, and the robber shot him!"

Doc Brooks hobbled through the huddled circle of men and ripped the banker's vest and shirt away from the wound. A low, disappointed murmur ran through the crowd as the doctor announced that the wound wasn't too serious. A little sick, Andy started for the door. Mary came to him, her face stricken.

"Oh, Andy," she sobbed, "we didn't even have a chance to pay Fuller. He'll surely take the ranch now."

Andy sympathetically put his arm around her shoulder and led her outside. The sheriff was swearing in volunteers for a posse.

Andy looked vainly for Mertzon. He hoped the outlaw hadn't had time to get back to the saddle shop. Tension gripped him as he realized what he had to do. There wasn't

much time. He held Mary's hand tightly and called: "Wait a minute, Sheriff. I don't think you need to do that. How about comin' into the shop with me?"

The sheriff stared quizzically, then followed him. Mary gazed at him in puzzlement.

IT WASN'T any trouble to find the bag of stolen money under the shop's back window. As Andy handed it over, he told Mary, the sheriff, and half a dozen possemen the whole story—about his boyhood in the Panhandle, about Tom Weaver, and about Rocky Mertzon.

"Rocky probably figgered I wouldn't wake up till it was all over, and then I'd be scared to say anything. If Jimmy hadn't found me and Mary waked me up, I'd still be lyin' here. I guess this means jail for me now," he concluded darkly. "Mary, I wish you'd take care of Jimmy."

Sheriff Bronson snorted. "Nobody's goin' to blame you for this, Andy. Maybe you should've come to me in the first place, but just the same, you tried to stop it. You like to've got your skull bashed in. Folks'll be grateful to you."

It turned out he was right. Andy was dead tired by late afternoon, when people stopped coming around to shake his hand. Eli Fuller hadn't sent any thanks, however. The banker had growled that it was all a plot of Andy's to get him killed. He sent word that he was taking over the shop the minute the note fell due.

His ranch secure now, old Charlie Wilson asked Andy to come help him run the ranch. No drouth ever lasted forever, he argued, and this one had about run its course. Besides, it would be handy to have a cow-wise son-in-law, he hinted.

But Andy couldn't forget the Weavers. No sign of Mertzon had been found. He knew the angered outlaw would eventually keep his threat, to tell the Weavers where Andy was. If Andy stayed, it meant more gunplay. So there was only one thing to do—pull out.

As he closed shop that evening Andy found his pistol and shoved it into his boot. Turning to go, he picked up Jimmy's unfinished quirt. He fingered it fondly as he

headed home for the last time. It was dark when he climbed the front steps of the lonely house. Jimmy met him at the front door. The boy's eyes were wide with alarm.

"There's a man here to see you, Daddy," he said excitedly. "He says he's a friend. But . . ."

Raw fear cut through Andy as he saw Rocky Mertzon standing there, not two paces in front of him. The outlaw's hands hovered over his gun butts. The gap between his teeth showed black behind the twisted, cruel lips, making Andy feel this man's ruthlessness.

"I changed my mind about the Weavers," Mertzon snarled, "I'll finish this job myself."

Andy felt cold sweat popping out on his forehead. Gripping the quirt handle tightly, he realized he couldn't beat Mertzon to the draw.

SUDDENLY Mertzon's hands moved downward. Andy shoved the boy to the floor. A million needles pricking his skin, he lashed out with the quirt and slashed it across the outlaw's face. The man bellowed with rage and pain. His guns thundered, but Andy was between them lashing madly at the outlaw's hands. One gun clattered to the floor.

Then the years rushed back, and Andy was twenty again, untamed, hard as a man can get only on the outlaw trails. Breathing hard, he threw himself desperately on Mertzon. Frantically, he tried to wrench the other gun out of the man's hand.

Teeth clenched, straining and sweating, the two men struggled for the weapon. For a second the muzzle grazed Andy's stomach.

Then slowly he twisted the gun back toward Mertzon, every muscle in his body aching with the effort. Beads of sweat stood out on the grunting man's forehead. Andy grimaced at the robber's hot breath in his face. The gun boomed then, and Mertzon went limp. Andy swayed dizzily a moment. Through the swirling gunsmoke he could see the outlaw lying twisted on the floor. He also saw Jimmy streak out the door.

A moment later half a dozen men, led by Sheriff Bronson, crowded into the room.

"There's your . . . your bank robber," Andy breathed heavily.

Bronson examined the outlaw. "Wanted to get even, eh?"

Andy nodded, his breath still short. The sheriff instructed the men to carry Mertzon's body outside. Then he turned back to the weary Andy.

"Doc Brooks'll get enough out of Fuller, takin' care of that shoulder, to buy the equipment he's been wantin'. And Fuller'll sure throw a fit when you pay him off with his own money, the reward money. The thousand dollars he's always offered for a bank robber, dead or alive!"

Then Mary ran up the steps and into the room, followed by little Jimmy. Seeing Andy on his feet, she sighed in relief, then almost fainted.

Holding her, Andy felt all the tension leave him, replaced by a warmth he hadn't known in four years.

"Jimmy sure knows who to go to," he told her softly. "But from now on he won't have to go hunt you. He can find you right here."

■ **If you like thrills and chills, here is just the magazine for you—breath-taking, hair-raising tales that will keep you enthralled for hours. Get a copy of pocket-size**

CRIME

FICTION STORIES

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Fear Pulls the Trigger

By Ralph Sedgwick Douglas

McCann fought only with his fists, not guns, yet he couldn't let a trusting kid think he was yellow!

HE LIKED to fight—with his fists, but not with guns. In the squared ring, with skin-tight gloves you could lose one week and beat that man the next week, or the next month. With guns you lost once, and you didn't learn anything!

Jack McCann, professional pugilist, came out of the barber shop, rubbing his cleanly shaven jowls, feeling tenderly the minor bruises and cuts he'd sustained on the face

the previous evening in the twenty-eight round encounter with the tough Irish Slade. He'd knocked out Slade, the local boy from the mines, and it had not been too hard. Deliberately, McCann had let him last in order to give the public an exhibition. There had been three hundred men packed in the hot, sweaty lodge hall when the two fighters went at each other.

The three hundred citizens of Varick had paid two dollars each to squeeze their way into the lodge hall. Of the six hundred dollars in cash collected, Slade had gotten fifty, and Jack McCann two hundred. The rest had been divided among the enterprising business men of Varick who had arranged the contest.

DERBY hat perched on the side of his head, big shoulders bulging in the checked suit, Jack McCann watched the passing riders out in the middle of the street, noticing the contempt in their eyes. Last evening, and this morning, he had been the biggest man in Varick. This afternoon he was lower than the lowest dog in town.

"Hell with 'em," Matty O'Brian had growled in the lunch room earlier in the day. "I'd let him wait till hell froze over. He's drunk and he wants a killing, Jack."

Jack McCann thought about that now. Several men had already acquainted him with the fact that Bart Kane, the local bad man, wanted to see him in the Happy Hour saloon. Kane had been waiting in the saloon for three hours now, and a group had been standing on the porch, waiting for the pugilist to show up.

"They want to see another fight," Matty, the manager, had said grimly. "They didn't get enough last night. They want blood."

It would be blood this time, Jack knew, if he went to the Happy Hour to see the tough Kane. It would be his life's blood because he'd never shot a gun in his life, and Kane was reputed to have a string of killings to his credit.

Smiling wryly, Jack McCann started up the street toward the hotel, and then he saw the kid again, watching him from the shade of an overhang awning directly across

the street. The kid was about eleven years old, and last night he'd managed to slip into the lodge hall to witness the fight with Irish Slade.

Coming out of the lodge hall office, which had been used as a dressing room by both fighters, Jack had spotted the boy dropping in through a small hall window. He'd been caught and was about to be soundly thrashed when Jack, laughingly, intervened. He remembered the days when he'd pulled that stunt himself.

He'd paid the boy's admission and let him sit directly behind his corner with Matty O'Brian. The boy had gripped the water bottle the first time Matty set it down, and he'd been ready every time Jack returned to his corner. Jack had winked gravely at the boy whenever he came back to his stool and took the bottle from him.

During those bloody rounds with the plunging Irish Slade, the kid had put Jack McCann on a pedestal. In every one of these tough western towns he'd had his following among the boys. Many times they'd pleaded with him to take them along and teach them how to fight. They'd watched him move around the ring like a big panther, dodging, feinting, shooting rights and lefts into the faces and bodies of stumbling spar mates. He'd put on exhibitions in the theaters, demonstrating the manly art of self-defense.

The kid across the street was just another one of the many who had been bitten by the bug, but there had been something more to this boy than the others. He was frail, a little too tall for his age. His eyes were blue, serious, old for a young boy. He had straw-colored hair which looked as if it had never been combed.

Jack McCann hooked a finger at the boy and he waited as the kid came out of the shadows and crossed the road, not very fast. Jack watched him quietly, remembering that when he gave kids errands to do they usually broke their necks getting them done. This boy would have run till his lungs burst—last night, or this morning, but this afternoon he'd heard of the stupid, drunken killer in the Happy Hour saloon, and the west had a code which even small

boys understood. When one man challenged another that challenge had to be met some way.

Jack took a few bills from his pocket and pressed them into the kid's grimy hand. He said,

"Get me a half-dozen of the best cigars, Bud. I'll be in the hotel lobby." He called all the boys "Bud," and they loved him for it. It was more personal. The boy nodded. When he turned away and started up the street toward the cigar store, he did not run. He walked steadily, quietly, as if he had many thoughts in his head and he had to turn them over constantly to get them straightened out.

JACK McCANN placed the brown derby more firmly on his head and started up toward the Overland Hotel. He knew what was going on in the boy's mind. Why didn't he, McCann, go into the Happy Hour and punch this tough Kane through the floor? Was he afraid? A boy of eleven, he knew, did not understand the term, "discretion." Neither did the grown-ups in these western towns.

Matty O'Brian had said, "This Kane's been the cock of the walk, Jack. He don't like it when somebody else comes along and gets the cheers. He's got to put himself back in the spotlight."

A hell of a thing, Jack McCann thought grimly, *when a man has to die for that.* He had to pass the Happy Hour on his way back to the hotel, and this was the second time this afternoon he'd passed the saloon without going inside. There were a dozen men on the porch, watching him as he walked briskly past the store fronts on the other side. Several of them sat in the barrel chairs, hats tilted over their eyes. Four men stood just to the right of the doors, and as Jack McCann went by, two of them turned deliberately to watch him.

Tight-lipped, cursing inwardly, the fighter continued on his way. He had his hands in his pockets and he was digging the fingernails into the palms of his hands as he walked.

A bunch of ten-year-olds were playing around a big freight wagon at the next corner, jumping in and out of

the wagon while the bullwhacker was in the saloon. They stopped to watch the fighter as he went past, and he knew that they, too, had heard. Kids kept their ears and eyes open. There were no cat-calls, no jeers. They just watched him as boys do, gravely, deliberately, no pretense.

It was this that hurt more than anything else. In every town, he'd been popular with the kids, and he liked kids. He had to leave this town of Varick with the brand of a coward.

MATTY O'BRIAN was sitting in the lobby of the hotel, a cigar in his mouth, an old newspaper across his lap. He had not been reading it. O'Brian was a small man with white hair, and bright, birdlike, blue eyes. Flies buzzed about O'Brian's head and he waved at them with his right hand, the cigar tilted toward the ceiling. He said quietly,

"Never mind what they think, Jack. We'll be out of this burg in two hours."

Jack McCann dropped into a chair. He tilted the derby hat forward on his head and he stared at the floor. They had their bags packed up in their room, and the westbound stage would stop at the hotel at six o'clock to pick them up. They were heading for the silver mining town of Red Rock, and beyond that Jackson City, and then Elmtown, Leesville, Winnemucca, a dozen and one small cow towns and mining centers.

"Damned fools," Matty O'Brian said. "They're worse than Kane."

"What's the argument?" Jack asked. He continued to stare at the floor, and then he started to crack his knuckles, one at a time.

"This tough," O'Brian growled, "lost a few dollars on the fight last night. He's saying you paid Irish Slade to quit. Now he wants to see you in the Happy Hour. You go over there and he'll get nasty. He'll want you to crawl or go get a gun. You don't have to go. You stay right here, Jack."

Jack McCann didn't say anything. He knew, and O'Brian knew, that this little difference went beyond the matter of a few dollars Bart Kane had lost on the fight.

Jack never had seen Kane in his life, but he'd heard men talking about him the past few hours. The barber had been quite excited.

"Greased lightnin' on the draw, mister," he'd grinned, "an' he kin shoot every damn button off yore coat afore you kin wink twice."

Sitting in the lobby chair, facing the door, Jack McCann heard the quick shouts up the street, boyish shouts, shrill yells of derision. He remembered then that the kid who went for the cigars was taking a long time to come back. He got up from the chair, recognizing that sound from the street.

"Jack—," Matty O'Brian started to say as he walked toward the door.

Jack McCann pulled up at the door and stood there, looking out. His manager lowered himself into the chair again, relief showing in his eyes.

At the next corner Jack saw two boys tearing into each other. One of them was the kid who had gone for the cigars. He was swinging wildly, tearfully, at a much larger boy, and a crowd of kids were swooping around them, howling excitedly.

The bigger boy was having much the better of the argument when Jack swung up the street toward them. Using his greater weight, he'd thrown the smaller boy into the gutter and was trying to get astride him.

Jack McCann lifted the redhead up and placed him on the walk. Then he helped the smaller boy to his feet. He saw the crumpled, broken cigars tight in the right fist. The boy's nose was bleeding slightly, and he was breathing in gasps, sounding almost as if he were sobbing, but he wasn't.

"That's all," Jack said. He started to hustle the boy up toward the hotel. Matty O'Brian was standing in the doorway, watching them. He looked at the fighter and then at the kid, recognizing the boy immediately. The kid still gripped the cigars in his fist, forgetting even that he had them there.

"What goes?" O'Brian asked.

"I'll take him upstairs," Jack said. "I'll wash him up."

In the room the kid let Jack sit him on a chair while he got out a towel and poured water from a porcelain pitcher into a basin. There were a few minor bruises on his face, and he was still trembling violently.

Jack McCann took the cigars from the boy's hand and dropped them on the table. He washed the blood away and held the kid's head back to stop the flow of blood from the nose. He said gravely,

"You should pick on smaller fellows in the beginning, Bud."

"He—he said—," the boy stuttered.

"I know what he said," Jack McCann stated. "Now forget about it." He knew how much chance the boy had of forgetting this thing. He took the kid downstairs a few minutes later, gave him a quarter, and watched him walk dully through the door. Matty O'Brian said soberly:

"That damned stage comes through in an hour and a half, Jack."

JACK McCANN sat in the chair, watching the door, the shadow in his eyes. He hadn't spoken much to the kid upstairs in the room. He knew the boy wanted to get away alone where he could think this over, reason it out some way.

Jack McCann strolled to the desk, took almost the last cigar from his inside pocket and bit off the end. He said casually:

"Know a kid with straw-colored hair, blue eyes? Smells like he's been around the stables a lot."

"The Flannigan boy," the clerk said immediately. "Young Don Flannigan. Works over at the Miller Livery. Tom Miller took him in when his mother passed away six months ago."

Jack McCann's eyes flickered. "No parents at all?" he asked.

The clerk shook his head. "His dad used to punch cows for Bar C years ago. Killed in a stampede when Donnie was three. The kid sleeps in the loft over the stables. I

guess Tom makes him work pretty hard for his keep, but then nobody else wanted to take him in."

Jack went back to his chair. He said to O'Brian, "That kid's name is Flannigan."

"All right," Matty O'Brian observed. "What about it?"

"A good Irish name," Jack said. He relapsed into silence for another ten minutes while the manager aimlessly swatted at flies.

A man came into the lobby, glanced at the two sitting in the chairs, and then passed on into the hotel dining room. They heard him go out a side door into the street.

"Checking up," O'Brian growled. "He'll go back to the Happy Hour now and tell 'em you're still sitting here."

"He'll be wrong," Jack McCann said. He stood up and tossed the half-smoked cigar into a spittoon.

O'Brian gripped the arms of his chair. He said, "Where in hell you think you're going, Jack?"

"Thought I'd have a glass of beer in the Happy Hour," Jack McCann told him, "before the stage came in."

O'Brian's blue eyes started to pop. "You're not serious, Jack," he murmured. "You ain't going over there?"

"Kind of think this town's waiting for me," Jack McCann said. "I'll see what the trouble is."

Matty O'Brian came out of his chair. "Look now, Jack—," he protested. "It ain't worth all that. What in hell do you care what this town thinks? In twenty-four hours you'll be a hundred and twenty-five miles from here. You'll never hit this burg again."

"That might be," Jack said patiently. "I'd still like that glass of beer, Matty. If I let this punk chase me out of town, I'd never go around again, Matty. Not with my head up."

He went out of the door then, pausing on the veranda which went completely around the entire building. He stood there for several minutes, the late afternoon sunshine coming in under the veranda roof illuminating the lower half of his body, his face being in the shadows.

He lighted another cigar here and he gave the town plenty of time to see him. A man waiting on the corner

near the Happy Hour suddenly spun around and ran into the saloon.

Matty O'Brian said from the doorway. "You don't have a gun, Jack, and a killer like this Kane is liable to shoot you down anyway."

"Stay where you are, Matty," Jack McCann said. He puffed on the cigar for several moments, and then he started up the street, walking slowly, the brown derby on the back of his head, the cigar gripped in his teeth, utterly no concern showing on his wide face.

PASSING two saloons, he could see men staring at him over the batwing doors, through the windows. A cowpuncher raced out of an alley from Miller's Livery Stable. He was coming very fast as if fearful of missing something, but when he saw Jack McCann he pulled up very suddenly, abashed.

The fighter passed him, heading straight down the street toward the Happy Hour. He saw shades moving all along the way, and he knew that this news was traveling like wildfire through the town.

The sun struck him full in the face as he headed west along the main street. He was thinking of men he'd whipped in the ring even before the fight started—men who'd been full of bluster preparatory to the match, but who had collapsed like balloons when they'd discovered the other man was not taking them seriously. Every tough in the ring tried to bolster himself with threats, Jack McCann had discovered. He was wondering whether gunmen were like that.

He went past the Happy Hour for the third time that day, passing it on the other side of the street. The crowd was still on the porch, watching him tensely as he approached. He walked to the edge of the boardwalk, but instead of crossing the street, he kept going toward the barber shop. He thought he heard a long sigh from the group on the porch.

Walking past the barber shop, he paused on the outside of the local gun shop. Every step he took now was being

reported to Bart Kane in the Happy Hour, and these little things, Jack knew, would begin to work after awhile—if Kane was that kind of tough.

Jacob Cohen ran this gun shop, his name painted in black letters on a white signboard over the store. Jack McCann went into the shop, the cigar still in his mouth. There was another display of guns in cases here, and he stared at them for several seconds before saying anything. Cohen continued to polish the gun in his hands.

The fighter picked up several of the weapons, examining them critically, looking into the barrels, weighing them in his hand. He saw two men standing directly across the street, watching him intently through the window.

"This looks pretty solid," Jack McCann said. He'd picked up a heavy Navy Colt, a formidable weapon.

"A bargain," Cohen said, "at fifty dollars."

"I'll need a holster," Jack said. He walked around the little room, looking at second-hand gunbelts dangling from hooks on the wall. He tried on several of them, and then he dropped the Navy into the holster of one of them. He said to Cohen. "I want it loose so she'll work easy."

Jack McCann practiced dropping the big gun into the holster and slipping it out. He walked around the shop a few times before paying his bill. When he left, it was already five o'clock, and the stage was due in at six.

He came out of the shop with the gunbelt strapped around his waist, his coat wide open. There was a larger crowd in front of the Happy Hour now. They watched him as he approached on the opposite side of the street, but again he passed by instead of crossing.

He saw young Don Flannigan watching him from the alley leading into Miller's Livery. There were other boys watching also, and they'd forgotten their games. All eyes were on Jack McCann.

MATTY O'BRIAN was still standing in front of the hotel when Jack McCann came up. The manager looked at the gun bulging under the fighter's coat. He was puffing furiously on a cigar. He said:

"Jack, you never used one of those damned things in your life."

"Always a first time," the fighter said cheerfully. He was grinning, smiling pleasantly, facing the Happy Hour saloon up the street.

"It loaded?" O'Brian muttered.

Jack McCann scratched his chin. "Never noticed," he admitted. Taking the gun from the holster, he broke it after a little trouble. The cylinders were empty.

Matty O'Brian growled, "You were going over there like that?"

Jack McCann closed the gun again without putting any bullets in it. He said, "Now, Matty, we don't want anybody to get hurt."

"In an hour—," Matty O'Brian started to say.

The fighter smiled. "I'll have that beer now, Matty," he said. "Wait for me."

Jack hitched at the gunbelt and kept walking. He'd had a cigar in a corner of his mouth and he threw this away now. He angled directly across the street, and he paused in front of young Donnie Flannigan.

"Mr. McCann," the boy whispered. His eyes were bulging and he was trembling.

"All right, Bud." Jack McCann smiled.

"Watch—," the boy started to say. "Watch—"

He couldn't get the words out, and Jack McCann patted him on the shoulder.

"Wait for me at the hotel," he said. "Stay away from that saloon."

He moved on up the street and he saw men watching him from the "Comanche" saloon, from the open doors of the "Roseland" dance hall. Windows were opening up along both sides of the street. Jacob Cohen had come out of his shop and was standing with his hands on his hips, watching. The barber who had shaved Jack earlier in the afternoon stood in the doorway, scissor and comb in his hand. A man with an apron around his neck stood next to the barber.

Jack McCann pulled up in front of the "Happy Hour"

saloon. It was a long, one-story, false-front building with a porch. The pillars holding up the porch were pock-marked with knife carvings. At least a dozen men stood or sat on this porch, none of them speaking, or even making a pretense of speaking.

Approaching the building, Jack had seen men slipping out of the side door in the alley. One man had an apron around his waist. They were leaving Bart Kane alone, the fighter knew. Placing one shoe on the lower step, Jack McCann said quietly:

"Fellow named Kane in there?" He made sure his voice carried over the batwing doors into the saloon. He experienced some relief in the fact that the killer had not come out already to meet him. It could mean that Kane was not too anxious now for this fight. The long waiting, the reports sifting in every few moments, may have been working on the man's nerves, wearing him down.

A man sitting in a barrel chair near the door nodded his head toward the door. The fighter went up the steps steadily and walked toward the door, his shoes heavy on the wood, making it creak. He pushed in the batwing doors and stepped inside, half-expecting a bullet in the chest.

Nothing happened. A man stood at the far end of the bar, facing the door. He was thin, narrow-faced, big ears. He wore a seedy black suit and a shoe-string tie. The coat was open and the pearl handle of a Colt gun protruded from the holster at his right side. His long slit of a mouth was open, the lower lip sagging. His face was pale, sickly, the sweat standing out on it, the skin blotched. The fear of death was in his yellowish eyes. His mouth was working as if he were swallowing something and couldn't get it down.

An empty liquor bottle and a glass stood on the bar within reach. There were no bartenders behind the bar, and no patrons except Bart Kane. The long, bony fingers of Kane's left hand gripped the edge of the bar; his right hand hung loose.

"You want to see me, Kane?" Jack McCann asked quietly. He started walking forward, straight toward his

man, fifty feet away. He walked steadily, deliberately, the boards squeaking beneath his tread, hands at his sides.

Bart Kane straightened up. Once his right hand tightened, and his lips started to form a futile curse, but with the fighter still coming toward him his nerve broke completely.

He managed to blurt out a weak, "Damn you!"

Jack McCann's left hand flashed through the air, the open palm catching Kane full on the cheek, knocking him away from the bar. He was very drunk and he staggered out in the center of the room. Kane stood there blinking.

Jack McCann continued to walk after him, without haste, slapping with both hands, hard, sharp slaps, brushing away Kane's weak efforts to protect himself.

The man staggered up against the bar and went down awkwardly. He lay there in the dirty sawdust, head hanging, the last symptoms of fight gone from his body. Jack McCann walked out of the door without even looking back.

Later, the west-bound stage from Varick went up the grade out of town, the driver snapping his whip at the six horses. Matty O'Brian said grimly, "We'll never hit this one again, Jack."

Jack McCann grinned in the gloomy stage interior. He had his right arm around the shoulders of a thin boy with straw-colored hair. He could feel the boy trembling—trembling with happiness.

"His name's Flannigan," he told O'Brian.

"What about it?" the manager asked sourly.

"A good Irish name," Jack McCann said.

COMING IN OUR NEXT ISSUE—

Another gripping yarn featuring Saul Epstein, the peddler who roamed the cowtowns and mining camps of the Old West. Don't miss this fast-action, bullet-packed story:

"GUNSMOKE VERDICT"

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

DEAD MAN'S TRAP

By Dev Klapp

The reformed owlhoot's knowledge of the eerie swamp was the only thing he could use to clear himself when he was framed for the murder of his benefactor.

TID MAXWELL stopped by the gate of the Chicken Claw ranchhouse to listen. There was someone in the front room, talking to Coke Gridlaw. The voice was low, yet each word carried on the quiet air.

"You're holdin' out on me, Gridlaw!"

Tid could not place the voice at first, though it was familiar, nor did he recognize the big roan, ground-hitched by the porch. But the tone of that voice sounded like trouble. Then recollection came suddenly.

"'Lead' Nelson!" Tid exclaimed, slamming through the gate and running for the house.

Before he reached it there came the flat, slapping sound of a shot. Tid cleared the rickety steps at a leap and yanked open the door. A man was hunkered over the hearth from which two stones had been lifted, exposing a dark hole. The intruder's arm was thrust in, elbow-deep.

Coke Gridlaw lay crumpled on the floor. An ugly wound stained the grey hair red above his temple. His pudgy hand clutched the walnut handle of a six-gun. The crouched man snapped a nervous glance over his shoulder. Alarm blanked his face as he recognized Tid's tall frame bearing down on him.

"Tid Maxwell!" he cried and leaped for an oak table that centered the room, overturning the heavy piece of furniture against Tid's unarmed 180 pounds of charging fury. The young cowman's knees hit the table's edge and he went over, clutching for Nelson's gun arm as the bandit reached for his weapon. A fleeting gladness flashed through Tid's mind, that Coke's girl, Millie, was in town with the buckboard.

THE TWO MEN thrashed about the room, Tid's left hand holding the intruder's gun hand, but Nelson's grip had found Tid's throat. Gasping for air, Tid tried to pull the choking fingers from his windpipe. As Tid weakened, Lead Nelson rolled over, landed a sideswipe to the cowhand's jaw and scrambled to his feet. Quickly he swung his gun to cover Tid, lying half dazed on the floor.

Tid pushed himself up to a sitting position. He studied the robber for a moment as his head cleared. "How'd you know where Coke had that money hid?" he asked the man curiously.

A smug grin spread over Lead's uneven features.

"Every bar-fly in town knowed the old coot's been layin'

away the hide money you and him made trappin'. Thought it was more'n it is, howsomever."

Tid didn't doubt the man. He knew how garrulous old Coke Gridlaw was when he got a shot or two of red-eye under his belt.

Tid remembered the day, three years ago, when he had told Lead Nelson, leader of the Big Thicket gang, that he was quitting the back trails and going straight. He had staggered up to the Chicken Claw ranchhouse riddled with the slugs that Nelson had pumped into him, and Millie Gridlaw nursed him back to health. Her pa had taken him in and given him a job.

Rage flushed the cowpoke's face as he struggled to his feet. Lead Nelson gripped his Colt significantly.

"You won't get away with this, Nelson!" Tid cried.

"That's yore idea, feller. I can fix it so's you'll swing for killin' the old man! With this here gun planted on you, and you a-layin' here by the old man when the gal comes home, she'll figger out her own ideas," he said.

Tid realized then what Lead had in mind. Millie was probably on her way home now. If Nelson carried out his scheme, the girl could hardly come to any other conclusion. He couldn't have Millie believing he had killed her pa. He'd try to jump Nelson, beat the outlaw into submission, haul him into town and turn him over to the law. The brand would be on the other hide then. Tensing his muscles, he leaned forward slightly, ready to leap.

"Like hell you will!" Lead Nelson cried. He brought his gun down with crushing impact against Tid Maxwell's head, sending the cowboy sliding limply across the room.

WHEN Tid opened his eyes he looked up into Millie Gridlaw's face. Golden-brown skin under a mop of sorrel hair set off the lighter brown of her tear-filled eyes. The cowboy jerked erect. Millie sat on the floor, her face in her hands. Coke's body lay as it had been. Tid looked down and saw that his own fingers were twisted about a gun butt—*Coke's gun.*

"Why did you do it, Tid?" the girl sobbed.

Tid raised himself unsteadily to his feet. His brain began to seek evidence that would clear him in Millie's eyes. That empty hole in the fireplace—the misplaced stones—would prove that someone else had been there. But a glance at the hearth ended that hope. Every stone had been replaced.

Another thought struck the troubled cowhand. *Millie did not know about the hide money!*

Tid put his hand on the girl's drooping shoulder.

"I want to tell you . . ."

"Don't touch me!" The girl recoiled. She jumped to her feet.

"I'm going after Sheriff Jim," she told him, her voice hard, "And don't think you can get away! Jim's dogs will run you down, you . . . owl-hooter!"

Whirling, the girl snatched open the front door and headed at a run for the corral. Tid heard the clatter of shod hoofs as Millie's pony left the yard.

HE REALIZED that he would have to catch Lead Nelson alive and make him confess to the killing if he wanted to clear himself. To gun the man down would do no good. There was only one way out of the country for the bandit if he didn't want to be seen—through Suck-Hole Swamp. Tid saw his chance.

Hastily he scrawled a note at Coke's battered desk in the corner: "I'm hitting for the swamp. Going after the man who killed Coke."

Lead Nelson would have to follow the only known path through the swamp. Being unfamiliar with the trail, he would most likely lose the path at one of three points.

Diving into the storeroom, the cowboy secured a coil of rope, four pigging strings and a kerosene lantern. The light, a small one which he often used when running trap lines in the swamp after dark, he chose in preference to a larger one standing beside it.

Suck-hole Swamp, a phenomenon of the dry range country, sprawled over ten miles of quivering land. Little Hell-lost Creek ran intermittently down from the hills

toward the Colorado River. There it met a long, semicircular rock cliff. Unable to join the bigger stream, Hell-lost banked its waters up against the limestone formation. The soft, loamy soil quickly absorbed this water from the mountains. Through centuries it had spread underground over a large radius. Soft mud, sinkholes that went to unplumbed depths, were interlaced by paths that followed rock strata, indistinguishable to those who did not know them.

As Tid plunged into the depths of the swamp, he thought of the days and nights he and old Coke had spent trapping coons, skunks, possums and an occasional big mountain cat, up and down the ten mile stretch of swampland. They realized a considerable sum from the sale of these furs. Old Coke secretly laid aside his share of this money to send his girl back east to school.

"I don't want Millie to live like a broke-down cowman's dotter," the old fellow often said, "She's made for better." He intended that the whole affair should be a surprise to Millie when the time came.

Tid followed the tracks of the bandit's big roan up to the swamp's edge and a good five-hundred yards into the rank growth along the faint, winding trail. There he came upon the beast, mired in the bog where Lead Nelson had taken the wrong trail. Tid's mouth set grimly, but he dared not risk the noise of a shot that would end the creature's suffering.

Every hundred yards the cowboy halted and stood listening. An owl hooted from a sycamore. A white-tailed deer plunged toward safety in dense undergrowth to the left. The countless noises of the swamp night blended with the vicious hum of insects. Once a damp strand of Spanish moss brushed his cheek. Tid hoped that it had startled Lead Nelson too.

A huge, gnarled oak thrust above the surrounding growth. A long rotted cleft ran down the tree-trunk, shoulder-high, where once a blaze had been cut to mark the path. When he reached this landmark, Tid paused to listen. A dozen paces farther he heard a sound to his right.

It was distinctly human. Blistering curses accompanied a series of thumps and bumps.

The boy's mouth quirked with a grin of satisfaction. Slipping to the right, Tid closed in. He dodged behind a big gum tree directly in front of his quarry.

"Quit snortin', Nelson!" he called.

A startled gasp came from the excited man. Then he became still, listening.

"You walked right into old Coke's cat trap, hombre," Tid told the man. "It ain't often a dead man gets the satisfaction of ketchin' his murderer!"

The cowboy knew that Lead Nelson was securely held. He and Coke had built the trap of two-inch, fire-hardened cypress stakes, tied, bound and nailed. Placed at intervals, these iron-like, wooden bars were arched and joined at the top. They would dull the sharpest knife. A six-gun bullet would ricochet from their rounded toughness. Carefully concealed, the trap had been originally built to supply an increasing market for mountain lions. Downwood had been dragged across the main path, leaving only one route open —to the trap. Nelson had run upon the obstruction, swerved to the left, tripped the trigger of the trap's concealed door. A lock had clanged behind him. Tid knew he had the bandit now, if he played his hand right.

"How come you know'd I'd hit for the swamp?" Nelson growled.

"I reckoned you wouldn't be hankerin' on going through the Widder Jones' place, gabby as she is—specially when one of them passel of kids would be bound to spot you. That'd kind of upset yore plan to lay the killin' on me!" There was contempt in the cowboy's voice now. "And of course you wouldn't dast head for town. There wasn't no other trail for you to take."

For the time it takes to bridle a bronc neither man spoke.

"I'll make a deal," Tid announced finally. "I know these woods. I'll fetch you out if you'll write a note to the sheriff sayin' you killed Coke."

"Go to hell!" Nelson exploded. "You'd run me into town

with a gun behind me even if you kept yore promise and turnt me loose! I ain't no wall-eyed fool!"

"If we don't make a deal you'll rot where you are and I'll ride over the hill. This is one fix you can't shoot yore way out of, hombre!"

TID was thinking fast. He'd have to step carefully. Lead was no fool. If the man suspected he was being played along, the plan would fail. Tid's eyes grew hard. Three years of going straight had squared his shoulders, but now they drooped. He was Tid Maxwell, the old Tid of the back trail again.

"I know when I'm licked, Nelson," he said. "Gimme half you got in that sack and we'll head for Mexico. If you don't, I'll gun you down in that box and get it all. Take yore choice. I can't go back."

The stout bars rattled and shook with the outlaw's efforts to free himself, then stopped abruptly.

"It's a deal!" Nelson announced. Tid did not fail to notice the treacherous softness of the man's voice.

The cowpoke scraped a match across his levis and applied the flame to the wick of his little lantern. The feeble light lost itself in the dark three feet away.

"Chuck them guns over here!" he ordered. "And that sack of *dinero!*"

The man in the dark made no move to comply. Tid waited a while then snapped impatiently: "I don't mean to calf around no longer!" The click of a six-gun hammer carried clearly to the outlaw's ears.

"Wait!" the trapped man cried, "How do I know you won't hightail it out of here with the *dinero* and my guns, leavin' me settin' here to starve?"

"That's yore gamble, Nelson," Tid told him indifferently.

The guns came first. They hit the tree and bounced two feet from the cowboy's boots.

"Now the money, hombre. I'll tote it, just in case," Tid said.

There was a pause, then the heavy sack described an arc and hit the earth with a dull clank of metal. Tid drew

a key from his pocket and turned the lock. He jumped back warily as the nervous badman sprang from confinement.

The feeble gleam of the lantern lighted the cold smile on Tid's lips and shot hard glints from his grey eyes.

"Don't make no funny moves, hombre! Remember, I'm the jasper that knows this swamp!" With this warning the cowboy started ahead. "Follow my light," he directed.

The two plodded through the swamp, winding and twisting, for the better part of an hour.

TID MAXWELL stopped. He spoke to the man behind him in a steady voice, putting just the right amount of concern in his words.

"I reckon I'm off the trail a little, Nelson. I'll have to prod around some. Being's I got a few wrinkles in my horns, I'm gonna hog-tie you while I'm gone, just to be on the safe side."

Nelson snarled and cursed, but Tid soon had him neatly trussed to a dwarf-oak. The little light winked and bobbed, and then finally disappeared.

Had Tid slipped back to watch he would have got a lot of satisfaction from the bandit's discomfiture, for Lead Nelson cursed the swamp, Tid Maxwell and himself. Automatically he worked at the bonds that bound his wrists. Suddenly he jerked erect. The pigging string was working loose! He freed his arms with a hard twist, then chafed the blood back into them. Nelson stretched to his full height, then hunkered down. A grin spread over his face. He slapped his knee and chuckled. Then he relaxed against the dwarf-oak, pulling a gleaming knife from a boot.

For the space of half an hour, Lead Nelson sat thus. Then a winking light appeared ahead of him out near the middle of a flat clearing. It was too dark to see Tid Maxwell's body at that distance. Rising slowly to his feet, Lead crept forward, feeling his way. The bobbing light kept just ahead. Breaking into a half-run, the outlaw sought to overtake the winking light.

It was then Lead Nelson's running feet plunged off into soft unresisting mud at the spot which the bobbing light had passed over a moment before. Desperately the man thrashed about, seeking a firm footing. The more he struggled the deeper he sank.

"Maxwell!" he shrieked, "Help! I'm sinking! Maxwell, can't you hear me? Come on back!"

No answer. The light floated away and finally lost itself among the trees at the farther side of the opening.

The man plunged and wallowed in the mud. He had sunk armpit deep in the stinking slime, then had hit firm bottom. His legs were held immovable. The swamp mud had him in a sucking grip. During the lulls, when his hysterical babbling quieted, the life of Suck-Hole Swamp resumed its beat. A twig cracked. Some animal squalled. A swamp rabbit shrieked between predatory jaws.

PALE shafts from the morning sun filtered through the rising mists at the big swamp's edge. Tid Maxwell sat hunched against a cypress. Suddenly the muscles of his shoulders tightened at a distant sound. He listened intently, then he rose and slipped around the big tree bole.

"This is it, I reckon," he muttered. Sweat stood out on his forehead though the early morning air was chilly.

Lead Nelson stood arm-pit deep in the mud, twenty feet away from the big cypress where Tid had been. His head lay over to one side, his eyes were closed. Covered with black, rotting swamp muck, his lips bubbled with frothy slime as his breath came and went. The bandit would have fallen and drowned during the long night had the substance that imprisoned him not created a suction that supported his exhausted body.

Tid stepped away from the cypress and stood at the clearing's edge. He had a rope coiled over his shoulder. Deliberately the cowboy cracked a twig under his foot. At the sound, Lead Nelson opened bloodshot eyes and rolled them sluggishly toward the sound. He saw Tid then. Froth spouted from his lips.

"Git me out! For Gawd's sake, git me out! I thought you was gonna throw in with me! This ain't no way to treat a podner! Throw that rope!"

Tid dangled the rope temptingly. "I'll chuck the rope to you if you'll write me a letter I can show the sheriff," he bargained.

"I'll write it—anything—jest git me outa this bog!" The man choked and coughed raspingly.

"It's gotta be good. What you gonna tell 'em?" the cowboy prodded.

"Chuck that rope! Chuck it! You hear me?" the bandit screamed.

When the man by the cypress made no move, Nelson lost what little nerve he had left.

"I'll tell 'em the truth! That I killed Coke Gridlaw for his money! My Gawd, I'd ruther swing than die in this stinkin' mud!"

SHERIFF JIM STANLEY, Millie and a deputy sheriff stepped from their concealment behind a pile of brush. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Tid," Millie wept, "I was nearly crazy, or I wouldn't have!"

"We heard what this snake said, Maxwell. Speakin' personal, I'm mighty proud it weren't you that done it," the sheriff said. "There's one or two pints about this shindig I can't get my teeth into, howsomever," he added.

"Like what, sheriff?" Tid asked, his arm around Millie.

"Well, how'd you know we was behind that brush?"

"I been waitin' for you all night. Heard you stompin' through the woods and figgered you'd stop and listen when you heard me talkin' to Nelson."

"How'd you git this hombre in such a hole without gittin' there yoreself?"

Tid grinned widely. "I banked on what I knew of the swamp and of Lead Nelson. Many a night me and Coke have set here by this tree and watched a light show over yonder at a certain time."

The cowboy looked from one to another of his listeners, then went on;

"The light would bob around for a while, then go flittin' away and lose itself in the woods. It looked just like the light from my little lantern here."

Tid's face turned grim, "I could have brought Lead Nelson in, but I knew he'd never confess that way. So I left a couple of piggin' strings loose when I tied him up and let the swamp bog and Lead's double-crossin' instinct do the rest. 'Course, I knew that mud-hole wasn't over his head—but he didn't!"

"That light! Now I understand it all!" Millie cried, "It was fox-fire!"

"Fox-fire, fox-light, will-o'-the-wisp. Some folks call it 'corpse candle'," Tid said, "Whatever you want to name it, that little bobbin' light shore pulled me out of a dark hole last night!"

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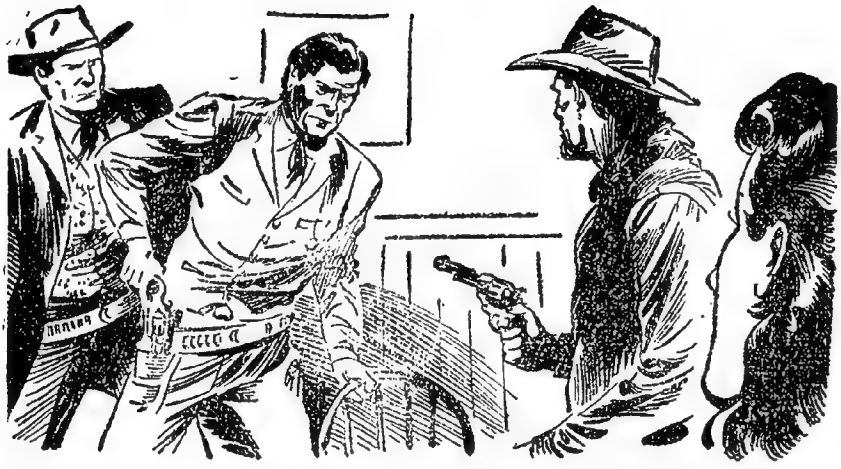

MISSION OF HATE

By Gerald James

He called himself Fiddler Dixon, but he could play more than one kind of music with his six-guns.

FOR a trigger-wise cowpoke looking for the man who murdered his uncle, Fiddler Dixon seemed downright careless as he ambled into Hyattville astride Big Red, gaunt and grizzled and dusty. There was only one excuse for his heedless behavior. The Fiddler had never seen the man he hunted.

With sober brown eyes he scanned the weather-stained false fronts along the dwarfed street, the empty board walks, the clusters of riderless horses drowsing at the rails in the October sun. Presently his glance lifted to the hammered heights of the Big Horns peering over the shoulders of the huddled stores.

"Well, Red, look it over," Fiddler directed. "You are invadin' the bailiwick of Mister Burn Walton, one hombre we've a smart of business with. They warned us at Wor-

land to keep out of the lion's den but we want a look at the lion first, don't we?"

The leggy gelding plodded on sleepily, making soft grey explosions in the powdery road. Responding to a nudge, he turned in before the One-Two-Three saloon's tie-rack and stopped.

Like a man long in the saddle, Fiddler Dixon stepped down stiffly and then tugged at a black fiddle case tied to his bedroll. Finding it still secure, he swung around and caught his image in the barroom window. What he saw disgusted him. He looked like a chucklehead—his holsters empty, a green scarf around his neck, his flat cheeks screened by a blond stubble which added a decade to his twenty-two years. The get-up—even to his name—was a fake and he hated it.

Still, he couldn't overlook a bet. He wouldn't know Burn Walton if he found him in his pocket; at the same time, he was a marked man. The news had preceded him—he'd heard it at Shoshone, at Thermopolis, again at Manderson. They were saying, "Some young punk from Texas is on the prod for Burn Walton and, pardner, Burn's sure laying for the Arbuckle."

When he heard that, Fiddler let his beard grow and slopped around like a chuckline rider.

He wasn't repeating a near-blunder he made at Kirby where he pulled his guns on an inquisitive rancher. That mistake taught him a lesson. To keep his nervous fingers out of mischief, he wrapped his rods in his bedroll, and since then he'd passed for a harmless drifter.

HE stepped under the saloon's wooden canopy just as the swinging doors split open and a cowhand staggered onto the sidewalk.

"Howdy, pardner," the cowpoke bellowed. "You wanna buy a pal—" At once his drink-weary eyes narrowed in doubtful recognition. "Say, ain't you Trigger Carroll from the Panhandle?"

Startled, Fiddler discouraged him with a bland smile.

"It's a funny thing—I've been accused of that before. Feller asked me that down at Douglas. This Trigger must be a somebody."

The man glanced at Fiddler's empty holsters. "I put the saddle on the wrong horse, pardner. I saw Trigger down in Tascosa give a rowdy a haircut at thirty paces without itching his scalp. He's a shooting fool once he's crossed, and I hear tell he's got plenty notches on his grip. He'll pull an iron before you can draw a breath."

"I'll tell him I met you."

Leaving the perplexed cowboy, Fiddler entered the saloon, crossed the room and asked the slack-faced barkeeper for a drink.

While waiting for the bottle, he gazed about. He noted several poker tables against the front wall, the sturdy armchairs, the enameled cuspidors beside the table legs. A shaft of sunlight dusted with smoke fell across a scarred upright piano at the far end of the room. Four cowmen played cards quietly; a handful of others chatted at the bar. All ignored the Fiddler.

Pouring himself a second drink, he caught the eye of the loose-jowled bartender. "Where'll I find Burn Walton?"

"He's usually here and about this time-a-day. If you stay hobbled, you'll see him." His face clouded with disapproval. "Won't do no good to ask him for a job, though. He don't take on drifters. He picks his bunch and they're all easy on the trigger."

"Mister Walton must be a big auger hereabouts."

The barkeep grunted. "Burn kin buy or sell anybody and anything he wants between Basin and Tensleep, stranger. His Triple L runs from here to hell and gone. Some months back he bought—so he says, anyway—the Bar U what butts his line on the north. Tomorrow he's marrying Kathy Shannon, and that's the same as marrying the Broad Angle what ties up to the Bar U. Then he'll have his hobbles on the whole valley."

Fiddler studied his drink. "Right interestin' feller. Think maybe I'll look around and see how he operates." His

glance fell on the piano. "Do you mind if I coax a few tunes from your mothbox? I'm lonesome for the sound of prairie music."

"Hell, no! That thing ain't turned a wheel in weeks. Not since our ivory pounder hit the trail with Bess, a gal Burn Walton once was sweet on. Help yourself—only lay off when Burn comes in. He's techy on the subject of music-makers. In fact, he's plumb hostile to the breed."

"Right interestin'." Fiddler left the bar and sat at the piano, his back to the door. Experimentally, he ran his supple fingers across the yellowed keys before striking up "Little Joe, the Wrangler." He followed that with "The Old Chisholm Trail," "Sam Bass" and "The Gol-Darned Wheel." His fingers hadn't forgotten.

Absorbed in his music, he paid no attention to the growing barroom traffic. He was fingering the lively notes of "Bonnie Black Bess" when six men trooped in.

HE felt rather than heard someone behind him. Automatically, he drummed on. A wiry body cut the pillar of sunlight slanting across his shoulders. Alert now Fiddler raised his head. He glimpsed a swift, shadowy motion. With brutal force, a heavy fist cracked against his chin. Consciousness flicked out momentarily.

Fiddler found himself face down on the floor with the piano stool nestling against his ribs. Painfully, the fog in his brain dissolved. He jerked his hands from his empty holsters and colored in embarrassment.

His eyes carried to the strutting back of a man walking away from him. At the bar the man turned and Fiddler saw contempt on his saddle-brown face, in his cruel black eyes and on the lift of his jet mustache, clipped short. No one had to tell him that this was Burn Walton, the man he hunted.

As Fiddler watched, Burn tapped a barrel-bellied citizen on the chest. White eyebrows stood out on the man's fat face like chalk marks on a tanned cowhide and he listened as one paid to give attention.

"Now don't you dare forget, judge." Fiddler heard Burn command. "I want you at the Broad Angle at noon, prompt. I don't want anything to interfere with my wedding tomorrow. Understand?"

"Sure, Burn, sure," Judge Morrow replied. "I can see how it is. I'll bring along the license. Don't worry."

Fiddler got up sluggishly, giving his brain time to clear. He thrust aside the overturned stool and walked slowly toward Burn Walton. Burn's five riders crowded close around him.

"Well, Mister Walton, you introduce yourself right forceful. Is that the custom in this country?"

"Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?" Burn's black mustache bristled, like a cat full of anger.

The Texan pushed out his full lips in resignation. "Since you put it that way, I won't keep you waitin'. Some call me one thing, some another, but to you I'm Fiddler Dixon. And I'm in Wyomin' on business, personal business, concernin' you and me."

Burn Walton's smooth cheeks tightened with impatience. "Why you crackpot piano player, I never saw you before in my life. What affair have I got with you?"

Suddenly the rancher's eyes narrowed quickly as though to hide the thoughts behind them but Fiddler knew Burn Walton was aware "the young punk on the prod" had arrived.

Turning crystal with coldness, Fiddler's brown eyes sought to trap Burn's shifting glance. "I had an uncle, a plumb honest gent named Matt Legarus, who met a sad death down in Texas a few months back. His ranchhouse burned down one night—with Matt in it. It looked like a sorrowful tragedy until the sheriff found a bullet hole in Matt's head. Then it was plain he'd been murdered and—"

"What's all this got to do with me?" Burn scoffed. "What do I care about your damned uncle?"

"I was just comin' to that. You see, he owned a ranch here in Hyattville—he called it the Bar U—and because I was his only kin, he figured I'd get it. Sure enough, he

put it in his will, so I came to Wyomin' to look her over. I thought maybe if I liked what I saw, I'd settle down."

Burn Walton laughed disdainfully. "The Bar U is my ranch—and I'm keeping it. Just what is your game, anyway?"

Unruffled, Fiddler fished in his shirt pocket and drew out two folded papers. "Why, Mister Walton, you don't have to take my word for it. I've got proof—legal proof. I've got the will and deed right here and we can let the judge look them over to see that they're all right and proper—"

Burn snatched the papers from Fiddler's hand. Without taking his smoldering black eyes from the Texan's face, he ripped them to pieces and flung them to the floor with an oath.

"Listen here, Fiddler—or whatever you call yourself. There's only one law in this valley. I'm it. Because you're a half-witted greener and don't know enough to pack a six-gun, I'm letting you ride easy. If you delay too long, my boys will attend the last rites."

FACING Burn stubbornly, Fiddler held his voice low. "I haven't finished my story, Mister Walton."

"I've heard all I'm going to stand for. Are you riding?" Burn's men closed around Fiddler.

"Just one more minute of your time, Mister Walton. I was down to Dallas when my uncle was murdered so I missed some of the details but I heard he had a caller the night his house burned. He wasn't seen again. The feller wore a black mustache, clipped short. I've been hankerin' ever since to meet him."

He saw the rancher's cruel eyes glare with fury, his leather-brown face harden with hate. "Why, you— Are you accusing me of—" He couldn't speak the condemning words. Guilt flushed his cheeks and Fiddler had seen enough.

"Guess I don't have to. You're doin' right well yourself."

"I ought to shoot you down like a horse thief," Burn

roared at Fiddler. "If you only had a gun on you—"

"I can arrange that, Mister Walton. Since you're the law in these parts, I'm servin' notice on the law that I want my property. I'll wear shootin' irons when I claim it."

He turned so abruptly he stepped on the toe of a Walton man crowding him. Angered, the rider threw a punch which Fiddler dodged. With the same motion, the Texan swung a left hook which caught the man on the neck, sending him sprawling.

Without looking back, Fiddler continued out the door to his horse. He thrust a hand into his bedroll, drew out two ivory-handled Colts and dropped them into the holsters. Then he lifted himself to his saddle.

"Red, we're goin' callin' on a lady. Uncle Matt always said, don't ever get mixed up with females, but we've got to disregard him this once. Another visitor'll show up at her headquarters before the evenin's over, like or not, and we want to be there. Get movin' Red. We made contact with our man—and it hurt."

AT A FREE gait, Fiddler followed the dusty road which wriggled upward toward Paintrock canyon. About him the sparse sage made a grey-green platform above the starved desert. In a sheltered hollow ahead, a copse of quaking aspens shivered in their October gold.

Twilight was coming fast, but far to the right he could still see Paintrock creek lined by a thread of cottonwoods and rabbit-bush curling down from the hills. It coursed through the Bar U ranch, assuring sweet water and sweet grass for its herd. Any cattleman would covet that spread of lush rangeland.

He turned off the trail toward the Broad Angle headquarters sprawled in the lee of a craggy butte. Amid the deepening shadows he distinguished the main ranchhouse under a lofty cottonwood, the bunkhouse a hundred yards beyond, a pole corral, the stable, the big pen and several sheds.

Reining in beside the log ranchhouse, he stared at a

large capable woman hanging a dishtowel on the porch line. "Good evenin', ma'am. Is Miss Shannon at home?"

"Not yet. She's at Tabin's to fetch her wedding gown. She'll be along soon—with Burn Walton, more than likely." She became suspicious suddenly. "Why? What do you want with her?"

"Well, I—I thought maybe she needed another rider."

"See Jig Rivers at the bunkhouse. He's the range boss."

"Thank you, ma'am." He rode toward a smudge of yellow light which marked the open door of the cowboys' quarters. A thin tight-lipped individual about to enter stopped to regard him with cool indifference.

"Evenin'," Fiddler said. "I'm lookin' for Jig Rivers."

"I'm Jig," he growled down the stem of a black pipe.

"I figured maybe you could use another cowhand."

"I'm not taking on new help till I size up the situation after the wedding. Burn Walton will have the say then, I reckon."

"I see. Well, Red's a mite leg-weary and both of us could stand some chuck. Have you room for my bedroll tonight?"

"You're late for supper but maybe Sam can rustle up something. Step down."

Watched by a crowd of curious ranchhands, Fiddler untied his fiddle case and lifted the bedroll from Big Red. After stabling and feeding the horse, he returned to the kitchen and ate heartily of the cook's beef and beans. Soon he joined the bunkhouse group starting a game of cards.

Jig Rivers looked up when Fiddler entered. He jerked his head toward a row of belts and pistols hanging on the wall. "We don't wear irons in the house, stranger. It's a ranch rule."

Fiddler hesitated. He expected trouble when Burn Walton showed up, and he didn't aim to sidestep it this time. Still, Jig Rivers was the boss here. Fiddler unstrapped his holsters and hung his Colts on an empty peg.

When he turned around, he saw Jig eyeing his fiddle case. "If you play that thing, you can pay for supper with a tune or two."

"Why, sure," Fiddler agreed. While he plunked the strings to tune up, the cowhands scattered to sit along the wall.

Completely at ease, Fiddler rested a haunch on the table, his toes tapping the boards gently. He played "Poor Lonesome Cowboy," "Billy the Kid," a dozen other range songs. His brown eyes moved slowly across the enchanted faces with far-away looks but always his roving glance went back to the door.

AT LAST he heard the swift beat of hoofs. Two riders stopped at the ranchhouse, a moment later one continued on and pulled up outside the door.

Burn Walton entered the room with firm strides. He stopped at the threshold, dropped his hands to his six-guns, lifted them when he saw that the youth was unarmed.

Pausing only a moment, Burn stalked close to Fiddler. "Well, Music Man, you get around, don't you? Didn't I make it plain this afternoon you were to clear out? What're you doing here?"

Fiddler stopped in the middle of "The Great Roundup" and lowered his bow. "Right now I'm entertainin' the boys."

"None of your fresh talk. Get your bedroll and fiddle off my place."

"Your place?"

"None of your damn' business. Get moving."

Fiddler lowered the fiddle, unsure of the angry rancher's next move. "I want my property—the Bar U ranch. Do I have to kill the man who murdered my uncle to get it?"

Without a word Burn sprang forward, snatched the fiddle from the Texan's hand and brought it crashing down on his head. With a loud crack, it collapsed in a tangle of wood and strings.

"You had your chance to leave without trouble," Burn shouted. "Hike, damn you, before you're carried out of here."

Turning an angry red beneath his shaggy stubble, Fid-

dler cocked his left arm and lashed out at Burn. The jab traveled only two feet but it connected hard on a solid jaw. The rancher staggered back, tripped and sprawled on the floor, stunned for a moment.

Leaping for his pistols, Fiddler snapped the belt to his waist and faced Burn. The rancher bounded to his feet.

"I ought to cut you down like a rattler but I'm offerin' you a fair draw." Fiddler's voice was low and flat but it carried to everyone in the room. "All right, it's your move."

Burn moved backward toward the door. "You're loco. I never saw your uncle."

"Don't take another step, my friend. It'll be your last."

A burdened hush closed over the bunkhouse, holding everyone motionless for a long minute. Then in measured tones Fiddler said, "Mister Walton, I came to Hyattville in a reasonable mood but I can't stomach a ramrod who'll mix murder, marriage, and thievin' to cut honest men off the range. Up till now you held a nice hand but the only trouble is, you've got just one draw."

"Get the hell out of here."

"I'm goin' to save Kathy Shannon from—"

Brisk steps on the hard earth outside carried through the strained stillness of the bunkhouse. They stopped abruptly.

FIDDLER shifted his gaze beyond Burn and saw a young woman, a slender brunette, standing in the doorway. He noted the surprise in her round grey-green eyes, the high color in her small oval face.

"Oh!" Kathy Shannon exclaimed. "We have a visitor. I wondered what delayed you, Burn. Aren't you coming to the house?"

Fiddler noticed her puzzled survey of the grim-faced ranchhands. She stiffened, aware of the tension in the room. "Burn, what's wrong here?"

Fiddler answered, "Ma'am, I have some dealin's of a difficult nature with Mister Walton. Will you kindly remain outside?"

"Kathy," Burn said, not turning his head, "we've got a crazy man here. See if you can—"

She stepped between the two, facing Fiddler. She looked into his grizzled face and said, not unkindly, "Who are you? What do you want here?"

"Ma'am, that—that's a fairly long story. I was—"

Burn moved behind the girl so that she stood in the way of the man who wanted to kill him. Fiddler saw triumph in his twisted mouth and in the bold dark eyes which mocked him.

"I don't understand," the girl said. "What's the trouble?"

Fiddler lowered his eyes to Kathy. He knew he was beaten. He couldn't shoot Burn Walton, or any man, in front of her.

He turned slowly, walked to his bedroll, picked it up and went out into the black autumn night.

STILL reviling himself for his weakness, Fiddler Dixon sat before a campfire on Paintrock creek some hours later. The face of Kathy Shannon was before him; it had been there ever since he had left the Broad Angle headquarters in disgrace.

His weeks of weary riding and prying had been wasted. He had found his man, he had had his chance to avenge his uncle, he had thrown it away. And for a woman.

Suddenly Big Red, grazing beyond the rim of camplight, whinnied. A horse answered from the deep darkness. Startled, Fiddler raised his head. Suspicion spurred him into action. Leaping up, he swung his booted foot against the fire, sweeping it into the creek. An instant later he flung himself into the grass just beyond his tiny campsite.

A volley of rifle shots rattled across the creek. Half a dozen bullets gouged into the soft earth where Fiddler stood a second before. More shots exploded. Hooves beat the range.

Before the horsemen had reached the creek, Fiddler ran to his big gelding, cinched up and raced along the valley, seeking the shelter of the canyon back in the hills. He rode for many minutes before resting his powerful mount.

When certain the ambushers had withdrawn, he sighed thankfully and said, "Well, Red, Burn Walton's bunch nearly drygulched us that time. Now we've got to figure out a new way to grab the jerkline. We can't go to Burn; we'll bring him to us."

He dismounted and prepared a cold camp in a little hollow against the canyon wall. "We must pay more heed to Uncle Matt, Red. We had Burn dead-cinched tonight but we bogged down when we saw calico." He sighed. "She's one elegant gal, Red."

THE sun was high and warm next morning before Fiddler left his shelter. Far out on the plain he saw a buckboard jostling toward the Broad Angle behind two fast-stepping bays. Even from a distance he recognized the huge body of Judge Morrow. He cut down a draw and waited behind a knoll bordering the trail.

When abreast of the carriage, he swung out, startling the driver. "Mornin', Judge," he called. "Excuse me, but I must have a word about a matter troublin' me. I'm—"

The judge arched his white eyebrows until he looked like an owl but he shook his reins for more speed. "Can't stop now, stranger. Got to be at a wedding this noon."

Fiddler loped beside the rig. "But, Judge, my business can't wait. It's powerful important."

"Can't be as important as Burn Walton's wedding. See me in town this evening— Hey, there! What are you doing? Stop it!"

As the judge shouted, Fiddler closed in on the bays and halted them. He leaped into the buckboard beside the judge. Squeezing into the seat, he held Big Red's reins.

"Get out of this buckboard! I'll blow you out—" The judge withdrew his hand when a muzzle dug into his fat side.

"I said my affair was plumb urgent, Judge. Turn around."

"Say, can't you understand? I'm going to officiate at Burn Walton's wedding. If I don't show up at noon, he'll be in town looking for me and there'll be hell to pay."

"That's the way I figured it, too. I've got some unfinished business with Mister Walton and I want you on hand to see that it's carried out accordin' to law. Burn Walton's kind of law. He tried it on me last night and it nearly worked."

"Say, talk sense, will you? What's this all about?"

"See, Judge, I knew you'd be interested. Right off, I want you to know my legal name's Andrew Carroll, sometimes known as Trigger. I came here seekin' justice, but you saw Burn Walton tear up my evidence—the deed and will. It seems Judge Colt is the only magistrate some folks recognize around here. All right, I can work in that court, too."

"You better not mix it with Burn. He'll kill you."

"Only if he can shoot faster and straighter than I can. I'll wait for him at the One-Two-Three saloon. When he shows up, I'll ask him once more for my ranch. If he won't listen to reason, he'll hear my six-guns but I never shoot till the other feller makes the first reach. You be there, Judge, to watch the rules."

"You're a fool. Nobody's ever stood up to Burn and lived to tell it. If you're wise, you'll skip out of Hyattville."

The Texan wasn't listening. "Say, you don't suppose Kathy Shannon will ride in to see what's up? I hadn't thought of that—" He rubbed his shaggy chin. "I hope we have time for a shave and haircut before we entertain Mister Walton."

TRIGGER CARROLL sat at the One-Two-Three piano playing range songs. He had turned it around to face the door. His flat cheeks freshly shaved and his hair trimmed close, he appeared almost boyish. The ivory handles of two pistols stuck from his holster. He sat alert, keen, yet nonchalant. All trace of Fiddler Dixon had vanished.

Now and then his brown eyes singled out Judge Morrow, whose hoary eyebrows were arched in pained tension.

"Judge, do you reckon he'll be along soon?"

"I reckon so."

He idled away another minute before going on. "Now, like I told you gents, I'll give Burn a chance to give up my property peaceful. I should shoot him in the back for murderin' my uncle, but I'm no coyote. Still and all, I'll throw lead the first reach Burn makes and I'll shoot to kill."

He looked up when the plop of rushing hoofs sounded in the street. He heard several horses slide to a stop . . . the tread of willful boots on the walk . . . the creak of the swinging doors.

Burn Walton paused in the entrance. Five riders crowded behind him. Sighting Judge Morrow, Burn rasped, "Judge, what do you mean by crossing me this way?" He took a step into the barroom. "I told you to be at the ranch by noon. It's now—"

The soft, slow notes of "The Dying Cowboy" came from the piano. His eyes just above the scarred mahogany, Trigger Carroll saw Burn whirl angrily, recognize him, and start in his direction. Burn's bunch moved closer too. The next few moments were tense ones.

Warily, Trigger got up, walked around the piano and stood against it. A dozen paces away Burn halted, his eyes violently dark, his clipped mustache flat.

"You— What are you doing here?"

"Playin' the piano—and waitin' for you."

"You're fixing yourself to make Hyattville your permanent residence. Over in Little Butte cemetery. You've got just two minutes to get on your horse and ride. If you take three, it'll be too late."

Trigger moved his hands until they hung loosely in front of him. "I guess maybe I won't, Mister Walton. I'm beginnin' to like it here. But I'll need a place to live, so I'm askin' you this once more for the Bar U ranch. Just speak up; there's lots of witnesses and the judge can make note of it."

"Why, you cold-footed yack—"

"Just a minute, Mister Walton. I haven't finished. I say to your face that you're guilty of Matt Legarus' murder. I'm givin' you back your two minutes to clear out. It's too good a deal for a polecat like you but I've an i-dee Kathy

Shannon would prefer it that way. Even hangin's too good for your breed."

While he talked, Trigger watched the wrath boil in Burn's slitted eyes.

"You talk big, you damned shorthorn. All right, what if I did kill Matt Legarus. I got what I wanted and I'm big enough to keep what I've got. Just to make sure of it, I'm going to shut you up—and for good. Nobody can talk to me like you just did and live to regret it."

With catlike thrusts, Burn flung his hands to his black-handled pistols. He never raised the barrels above floor level.

Two shots exploded in the barroom like cannons in a cave. Through the smoke, Trigger saw Burn Walton hang on buckled knees for an instant and then topple to the floor, twin bullet-holes in his shirt.

He lifted his irons, training them on Burn's riders staring down at their fallen boss. Mouths agape, they backed toward the door. There they turned and ran for their horses.

Trigger dropped his Colts into their holsters. Expressionless, he looked at the crumpled figure before him. He felt neither elation nor remorse. He had given the man his chance—more than he deserved—and the man had refused it.

A lathered horse flashed past the barroom window. Trigger glanced up in time to recognize Kathy Shannon. She was looking in at him, pulling up her mount.

Trigger turned to the row of men at the bar. Not one had moved. He said, "All right, Judge. Let's call on the sheriff and get that kidnapin' charge straightened out."

EXPECTANTLY, Trigger Carroll looked up when the sheriff returned to his office.

"All right, Alf," the sheriff said to the deputy sitting beside Trigger. "I'll take charge."

As their eyes met Trigger observed the officer's large mouth lose its sternness. "Come on, the judge wants to see you." A spreading smile lifted his sandy mustache. "He

says your claim to the Bar U is plumb legal. And if I was you, I wouldn't fret myself too much about that kidnaping count." He paused, taking delight in his burden of good news. "Besides, there's a lady who's asking about you."

They walked without speaking down the board walk to Judge Morrow's office. Kathy Shannon sat talking to him.

Doubtfully, Trigger scanned her small face. He was reassured by the approval in her wide grey-green eyes.

"Hello, Trigger," she said.

"Good evenin', ma'am."

Her quizzical expression gave way slowly to delight. "My, I hardly knew you—shaved and all. You're much younger than I thought you were."

"Well, ma'am, I'm past votin' age. I can tell you that."

Her smile was warm. "I just had a talk with Judge Morrow and he told me about Burn Walton—and what happened. I want you to know I'm grateful to you."

"You're not holdin' a grudge against me?"

Her happy laugh was music to him. "How can I hold a grudge against a neighbor? You are going to be my neighbor, aren't you?"

"Maybe I'd like that, ma'am. I was plumb homesick for Texas a while back but now— Could we ride out—out your way and sort of talk it over?"

"I'd love to, Trigger."

✠ **Now that you have come to the end of SIX-GUN WESTERN, we hope that you have liked the stories. Why not tell us what you think of our pocket-size magazine?**

We will pay $2.00 for every letter which we select to be published in the back of the next issue. So, dear readers, get busy and write.

Cow-Country Mail Call

Conducted by Dobie Dallas

HI, THERE, pardners. Glad so many of you are around to swap our brand of chin music, because this time we've got some really important business to jaw about. That's our new streamlined pocket size, and we've been hearing plenty from you readers. Most of your letters are pleasant to these worn old ears o' mine, because they go right along with us in our idea of giving you a powerful little magazine that's convenient in size and yet packs a lot of zesty, bullet-packed reading. These seem to be the days when nobody has room to carry around a big magazine, and a good little one that's easy on the supply of gold dust is the right answer all 'round.

One of the first letters to come in was from Sam Hume, of San Angelo, Texas. Sam led off the pleased readers in no uncertain terms. He writes:

"I was surprised to see a little book on the stand called SIX-GUN WESTERN. *I had been reading the regular, big-size magazine by that name for a long time. In fact, I never missed an issue and it was my main source of entertainment. Anyway, I bought the little one and to my surprise and pleasure, it was every bit as good as the big one, and cost so much less. The stories are swell, and I found myself carrying it around and reading whenever I had a little extra time. Now I'm sold on the smaller size. Keep up the good work!"*

Thanks, Sam. That is just the kind of reaction we were hoping for, and you hit the nail on the head when you mentioned how easy it is to carry our little magazine around and do a little reading whenever you felt like it. Then came a note from Gordon Fletcher, further out West, in San Pedro, California:

"I was in this tuna port for a week and had considerable time on my hands between jobs I had to do. I picked up your magazine and must say it was just what I needed. Plenty of stories, and each one just long enough to fill in some time I had with nothing to do. I wish there were more little magazines of this sort. Do you publish any others?"

Gordon, that note did our hearts good, particularly your question about other small magazines. Sure—there are others. Next time you pass a newsstand, look for POCKET WESTERN, POCKET DETECTIVE and POCKET HOLLYWOOD DETECTIVE. You will find them all crammed with fast-moving, thrill-packed yarns that will bring you tops in reading pleasure. Write us what you think of them. Next, we hear from Robert M. Wowak, of Toledo, Ohio:

"I used to be an avid pulp reader, and then, about a year ago, I found myself buying only pocket books that sold for a quarter because I could carry them around. Now I'm a pulp fan again, because I like the short stories and your magazine costs so much less. I'm surprised you didn't bring it out before."

You're sure shootin' straight, Robert. What you say is just about what we hear from a lot of others. Now here's one that's a little different, from Henry Gurvey, of Charlotte, North Carolina:

"I see in your new pocket-size SIX-GUN WESTERN *that you ask for opinions. Well, I think you will find a lot of readers who like the small size, but I used to read the former full-size magazine every time it came out and I was crazy about the two sections of comics in the book. I couldn't wait to read the next adventures of* K-Bar-Kate *and* Six-Gun Smith. *Of course, I don't suppose you can get these in the small pages, but I'll go on buying* SIX-GUN WESTERN *just the same because the stories are fine."*

That's right, Henry, we can't get a picture section into the little books, but we do deliver the best stories we can corral. Arvid Paulson, of Cairo, Illinois, writes:

"I've bought several of your pocket-size magazines and I must say I like them a lot. They seem to have almost as much reading as the 25-cent magazines and they are a lot cheaper. I hope you publish more of them."

Pardner, that's just what we plan to do. There's a new one coming up called CRIME FICTION STORIES that will be a humdinger! It will hit the stands on September 21. Look for it. Lastly, we dip into the mail sack and come up with a communication from Edward Byrne, of Gainesville, Georgia. He has quite a novel idea to suggest—a wide departure from the usual run of Western stories. Here's what he has to say:

"For many years, I've been a regular reader of Western magazines and books. It seems that they have all settled into a dreary sameness—the old stories of feuds between cattlemen and sodbusters, the same old mining camp yarns, the old gunfights at the end with one just like the other. This might sound screwy, but why don't you combine a regular Western character with some other type of story? In other words, a cowboy can go and have adventures in the city, or in the army, or he can ship as a seaman and go around the world, always calling on his western tricks to get him out of tough places. Maybe he could go into the realm of the fantastic, and make a flight to one of the planets, but always he is the typical western cowboy."

Now, Ed, that surely was a brainstorm. Believe me, we here at the New York office are going to give this subject a lot of tall thinking. If we decide to follow your suggestions, you will hear from us pronto.

Well, amigos, that's about all for this time. Keep your letters coming and the best ones will be printed in our next issue. Hasta la vista. —DOBIE DALLAS

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